

Daydreamer and the Shadow Man

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/14686791) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/14686791>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham , Hannibal Lecter , Alana Bloom , Jack Crawford , Winston (Hannibal) , Abigail Hobbs , Margot Verger , Beverly Katz
Additional Tags:	Hallucinations , Masturbation , Flashbacks , Implied/Referenced Self-Harm , Love Letters , Riddles , Murder Husbands , Murder Mystery , Underage Drinking , Grooming , Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper , Hannibal Lecter is a Cannibal , Will is a Mess , Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Alpha Will Graham , Alpha Hannibal Lecter , Bottom Will Graham , Top Hannibal Lecter , Biting , Mystery , Young Love , Anxiety Disorder , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Canon-Typical Violence , Murder , Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism , Stalking , Will Graham Knows , Loss of Virginity , Virginity , Virgin Will Graham , Knotting , Mating Bond , Alpha/Alpha , Unsafe Sex , Creampie , Oral Sex
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Daydreamer and the Shadow Man
Collections:	HanniGrahams , Hannibal
Stats:	Published: 2018-05-17 Completed: 2018-06-29 Words: 72,515 Chapters: 6/6

Daydreamer and the Shadow Man

by [HigherMagic](#)

Summary

After Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Will can't reconcile Abigail's death. He's done - with all of it. He needs to escape, to return to the only place he has ever felt safe and wanted. That place ends up being a sleepy town on the other side of the Chesapeake Bay, where he spent one summer as a child, exchanging riddles and letters with his dearest friend: the Shadow Man.

Notes

Did you know it's Omegaverse day? Well I didn't until about 7 hours ago! And in the time between then and now I word vomited the first part of a Bellevue/Murder Mystery AU featuring Gay!Alpha!Will! I absolutely blame Luc for this so if you want to yell at someone GO YELL AT THEM.

I based the town off of a place in Maryland and stole the name from my hometown in England. Any additional similarities to a real place is purely unintentional.

I think I tagged it well enough, but here's some extra notes: there is a STRONG element of grooming Will when he's a child (through 8-16). It's not sexual but it's definitely not something I condone either. Also, yes, shocker, I'm writing Alpha!Will but he's definitely on the ambiguous side of the spectrum when it comes to his relationships and stuff. Also all the stuff involving minors is, like, underage drinking and the first time ANYTHING sexual happens with Will, he's 16 and just using his hand for company (which is why this isn't tagged with Underage).

This story jumps around in the timeline too, it's not linear, hence the flashback tag.

If anyone wants more details on certain things based on the tags or notes please feel free to message me here or on Tumblr (same name) and I'll be more than happy to answer any questions/needs for explanation.

This story has three parts (another shocker - a set parameter?? Who am I). I hope you guys like it! I blitzed this in about five hours between midnight and 5am so I haven't slept but idk I'm pretty dang proud of it so far.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [\[中译\] Daydreamer and the Shadow Man 幻想家和影子人](#) by [HayKer](#)

Chapter 1

"Are you sure about this?"

Will smiles tightly, and shakes his head. "No," he replies. Short. Dismissive. It's not fair to her for him to be so curt with her – she's done nothing wrong, after all. She worries.

A rough, aggravated sound meets his reply. Will doesn't pull his eyes away from the road.

The town of Harrogate, Maryland, as of the last census, has a population of just over two thousand people. It butts up right on the river bridge where the Chesapeake Bay becomes the Eastern Bay, on the East side of the water. It is a quiet, homely place – the kind of place where people who are born there rarely end up anywhere else, or they leave as soon as they have the means to. It's the kind of place where people can raise their children in peace and harmony.

There is a lot that has sold for twelve thousand dollars. Two acres of land with a wreck of an old house sitting in the center of it. There are trees at the back of the property – a wildlife preserve of some endangered bird where no one can build, and the house confronts a tiny dirt road that is less than well-traveled. It's quiet, and removed, and Will bought it as of two days ago.

Harrogate has had a single murder, twenty-seven years ago, when Will was eight. This is the kind of place where people still remember that sort of thing.

It's as different from Baltimore as he could possibly find for so cheap, short of moving to Wyoming or Colorado where he might really be able to disappear.

Will remembers this house. The white walls are peeling and weathered, the roof is on the verge of collapse. The grass is overgrown, and the trees have entirely devoured the back fence on the edge of the property. This house was where that boy had been killed. When Will fishes the key out of the mailbox, along with a welcome packet from the realtor of the property, he goes inside, laughing to himself at the idea of locking up a place like this.

The innards are completely barren. The wallpaper has been removed and torn in places, the ceiling in the master bedroom has water damage, and Will can smell the dank, musty scent of mold coming from the door leading to the basement. The floors might have been carpeted once, but what remains of it has been shredded beyond recognition, as though thousands of cleat-footed soldiers have marched their way through and ripped it to pieces.

She shivers next to him, wrapping her hands around her stomach. "This place creeps me out," she says.

Will looks at her, takes in her big, blue eyes and pale cheeks, the straight sleekness of her hair, the scarf around her neck. "You'll get used to it, as I do," he says.

She smiles at him, thin but trusting. He reaches out and sighs when his fingers ghost along the ridge of her cheekbone. "Perhaps both of us will find some rest here."

"That would be nice," she replies.

"That was some good police work out there, Will."

"It didn't feel like good work," Will says, sullen and withdrawn. He hasn't slept in what feels like days. How can he, when as soon as he closes his eyes, all he can see is the gush of her blood staining his hands, the terrified and trusting look in her eyes? She had believed he could save her, right up until the light went out while he screamed himself hoarse calling for a medic.

"Garret Jacob Hobbs is dead. You've saved the lives of countless future victims."

"I don't care," Will hisses. Jack had followed him to his home, when it had gone three days without answering his phone calls. "I'm done."

"*Done?*" Jack's eyes flash, flickering red with anger. Will's head feels too hot and one of his dogs, he can barely see which one, licks his hand. It's probably Winston. He's a good boy. "You can't be done."

"And yet."

"What will do you?"

"I'm leaving," Will says. His bags have been packed for days. He doesn't want to take much with him. The listing sign at the end of his driveway should have been a clue – is Jack really that willfully blind? "I'm done with this. You borrowed my imagination and now I'm taking it back."

"There are other killers out there, Will," Jack growls. "Ones only you can catch."

"Yeah, well. Find someone else." Jack's snarl could have rattled the resolve of a grizzly bear, but Will won't budge on this. Her eyes pierce him like the wound in his shoulder, dealt by Hobbs after he'd slit his daughter's throat. Will could have shot him – he should have shot him – but his rage had gotten the best of him and now his shoulder is all fucked up and it will take a while to heal, but it will heal. "If the killers are smart enough to outwit you, I say let them."

"Where will you go?"

Will sighs. He's starting to get tired. The painkillers he's on tend to knock him out. "Away," he replies.

He had tendered his resignation after returning from Minnesota, both to Jack and to the University. They'd begged him to stay, offered to double his salary and increase his benefits and, though he wants to just drop it all and be done, man cannot live on willpower and stubbornness alone. A remote teaching job and remote consultant is all he could give them. Nothing face-to-face. No meetings. No visitations. A prisoner in his own right.

"Are they paying you well, at least?" she asks, her hand settling lightly on his shoulder.

He sighs, rubs his thumb under his nose, and sniffs. "Enough to live by," he replies. "Not like I have a mortgage to worry about anymore."

"Please, don't forget to eat."

Will sighs. He stands from his laptop, going to the dirty, streaked window, and looks outside to the back yard that stretches just far enough that someone could be hiding in the trees and he wouldn't notice. He pulls his robe more tightly across his shoulders, watching as Winston and Addy chase each other in the grass, barking and carefree. He only brought two of his dogs with him. He learned the hard way that picking up strays is less than cathartic.

Harrogate is, of course, small enough that any newcomer garners attention, especially an unmated Alpha who has bought the infamous murder house. Will sleeps on a bare mattress in the guest bedroom with only a sleeping bag for warmth, wary of sleeping in the master bedroom until he gets the water damage assessed and fixed. It would be some cruel kind of karma for him to die of mold or of the roof caving in on him during the night.

A knock comes at the door in the midmorning. He's awake, but wants to pretend he's not. His car isn't hidden. He thinks about taming some of the grass behind the house so that he can park it there, so it's not immediately visible from the road.

She appears in his doorway, looking down the stairs, then to him. "You should answer," she says.

Will huffs, and rolls over onto his stomach. "No," he replies.

The knock comes again. There's no doorbell, thankfully. "Please," she whispers. "You're going to have to talk to someone other than me eventually."

One more attempt. One more knock. It comes. Will closes his eyes, sighs, and heaves himself up from his bed, pulling on his robe from the door and plodding downstairs. There's a small arch of glass in the door, through which he can see the tops of two people's heads, blurred but clear enough to show that they're both brunettes.

He opens the door, squinting at the midmorning light and the even brighter, garish beam of the two overly-wide smiles he's greeted with. They're cookie-cutter perfect, the type with one child of each gender and a golden retriever as a pet with a white picket fence. "Morning!" the woman says. She's holding a covered dish in her hands. Will smells crust and sugar and his stomach turns. "Welcome to the neighborhood!"

Will raises an eyebrow. He bought this property with the express understanding that he *wasn't* joining some kind of neighborhood.

At the woman's side, almost half a foot taller than her, stands an Alpha. He's smiling as well, lines in his cheeks and forehead that say he does it for most of his waking hours. "Sorry to bother you," he says, drawling in that way city-folk don't. "I'm Malcom, this here's my wife Deborah. We live just down the street at the next property."

"Um." Will stops, blinking and rubbing at his eyes. "Yes. Hi. Sorry. Morning. I'm Will."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Will," Deborah says, and holds the dish out like it's her hand to shake. Will takes it, too startled to do anything else. "I made you one of my crumbles. Peach and blackberry. Best in the county, if I do say so myself."

Her accent is softer. She's not from here. Will blinks down at the cover of the dish and then looks at the Alpha, then his wife.

"*Smile*," she whispers behind him, and Will's mouth manages to twitch into something vaguely resembling that.

"Thank you," he says. At his feet, Winston and Addy have trotted up to greet the newcomers. They're friendly animals. Deborah's eyes widen in delight and she crouches down, cooing.

"Oh, what beauties!" she says. "Are they friendly?" Will nods. "Aren't you just a handsome devil?" she says, reaching out to pet Winston's face.

Will clears his throat, looking at the Alpha again. His smile hasn't wavered in the slightest. "Thanks for the crumble," he finally manages, swallowing harshly when Deborah straightens. "I'll be sure to return the dish when it's done."

"Oh, don't rush yourself! Good things need to be savored," Deborah says. Her smile is back to a thousand watts and Will resists the urge to cover his eyes.

They stand in awkward silence for a moment longer, before Malcolm laughs and rests his hand on his wife's back. "Well, we won't keep you. Just wanted to stop by and say 'Hi'. If there's anything you need, you can let us know and we'll help you out."

"Thank you," Will says. They nod at him, and turn from the house, walking towards their car. It's a bland vehicle, an old four-door black Ford. Will closes the door and locks it, before he takes the crumble to the kitchen. The fridge is empty except for beer, whiskey, and a bottle of ketchup. There's a single crumpled bag of fries from Wendy's in the bottom. Will doesn't even remember putting it there.

"You need to go shopping," she says from behind him. When Will turns, he sees her leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest, one eyebrow raised and a fond smile on her face. Will sighs, puts the crumble in the fridge, and closes the door.

"It's too soon," he replies.

"When is it too soon to eat?" she answers.

"I just mean it's too soon to...*socialize*," Will says.

"I thought that was the point of this," she replies, other eyebrow rising to join the first. "To forget. You can't erase old people without replacing them with new ones."

"Don't project on me," he snaps. She blinks at him, and tilts her head to one side, and Will sighs. "I'm sorry."

She smiles. "I won't be around forever," she says, gently, but tired. They've had this conversation too many times. "Eventually you need to wake up."

Will presses his lips together, and closes his eyes, rubbing his hands over his face.

"This is my new cell number. Don't give it to Jack."

"Will -."

"Alana. Please."

Alana presses her lips together, her mouth curled down, her eyes deeply sad. "I'm sorry," she whispers, guilt weighing her words like the feather on Anubis' scales that measure the heart of a man. "I told Jack not to let this hurt you. I should have been there."

"Been there?" Will repeats, acidic. "What could you have done?"

"I don't know," Alana replies. "But you shouldn't have been alone."

Will's head hurts. His shoulder hurts. His chest aches, something deep and clawed tearing him from the inside out at the pain in her eyes. He steps towards her and she tilts her head up, shivering when his hands touch the bare skin of her arms.

"Don't remember me like this," he says, whisper-quiet. This is as close as she's ever let him get. In another life, maybe, *maybe*, he would have touched her more. Given her the adoration and the attention she deserves. But not this life. Will's heart has never been his to give away.

He cups her cheek, his thumb resting at the corner of her mouth when her lips part. "Are you going to remember me like this?" he asks. "When I'm turning my back?"

"No," she replies, steady, steel-eyed.

He bites his lower lip, the burning in his eyes sharpening now. Not tears – he doesn't have the luxury of feeling sorry for both of them. She brings one hand to his shoulder, fingers curling, and he sighs, leans in, and touches his forehead to hers.

"You will always be welcome with me," he tells her, vows it as solemnly as a groom might to his bride on their wedding day. Her heart flutters under his hand when he slides it from her cheek to her neck – hammering but weak, like a hummingbird beating itself against the bars of its cage. Something that cannot fly free, but desperately wants to feel the wind in its face.

He opens his eyes to find hers closed. She's so beautiful, the only bright thing in a world of darkness. His touch leaves smears of ash behind in the form of goose bumps. It is fitting, he thinks, that in going supernova, he damages his sun and leaves nothing but fire in his wake.

"Be safe," she whispers, less a request and more a prayer.

He smiles. It's the first genuine one in a while. He cups her face and kisses her forehead. "I'll try."

Will has a scar on his left wrist. He got it when he was younger – not from any deliberate self-destructive desire. He used to wear rubber bands on his wrist. They were useful, a rubber band can serve a variety of purposes and it's one of those things that he had found himself always needing, in his youth, whether he was helping his father repair boat engines, or wanting to play Cat's Cradle with himself, or needed to hold something in place while the glue dried.

He sometimes tucked things into the rubber bands. Pens, paperclips, odd bits of string. Anything he thought he might need during the day.

He started snapping the bands when the letters started.

He knows this house. Not because of the notorious murder that happened here all those years ago, but because his dad took him here one time during oyster season. "We go where the business is," he'd say. Will remembers the water, the quiet streams, the mornings spent fishing and the afternoons flying by as he'd followed his dad from boat to boat, looking for odd jobs and repairs that could be done for extra cash. There were only so many ways for an Omega to make a living in those days.

They'd rented a room in this house. Not a lot of people rented rooms back then, but hotels were full and an Omega with an adolescent Alpha put people more at ease than a lone Alpha or a couple who would pose more of a threat.

That was the summer that the homeowner's son was murdered. An Alpha, just presented. Will had been the one to find the body.

He remembers it, clear as day. His father was out, free of suspicion, thank God. The kid's name was John. He'd spend the less nice-weather days babysitting Will while his father and John's parents were out and about. He showed Will how to make a catapult out of pencils and rubber bands. He'd shown Will the duck nest in his backyard where the nettles were thick enough to hide the delicate eggs.

He'd shown Will the old letterbox in the forest. "There used to be a house here," he'd said, his eyes bright and red and eager to show this starry-eyed boy all of the secrets of his town. "Legend says a witch lived in these woods, and she'd catch and eat the children that would try and go into her house."

"Why?" Will hadn't known any better back then. John was one of those charismatic children. The kind that grow up to start religious cult compounds in the desert. These are things Will only understands now that he's older.

"I don't know," John had said, laughing when Will got scared. "It's just a story, kid. Come on!" And then he'd show Will his secret stash of candy in the basement and they'd pig out and play violent video games until their parents got home.

Will doesn't remember a lot about John anymore, except his smile. That was the first sign.

Then the first letter.

Will had ventured out to the letterbox one day, when John was busy with his Omega boyfriend and had told Will to go play. Will knows now what they were doing. There's a child with John's likeness somewhere in the world, he's sure.

In the base of the tree, if it still exists, are carved the letters "Look up", and an arrow pointing to the letterbox. It was a big box, large enough to fit a doll or a small statue. Will had climbed onto one of the fallen logs by the tree and opened it to find a piece of paper inside.

"I am tall when I'm young, and short when I'm old. What am I?"

Thankfully, his pen had been in his rubber band. Will had scribbled "A candle" and put the note back in the letterbox. His father's voice calling him back for dinner had summoned him back, and Will had gone, and forgotten about the letterbox entirely by the time he'd gotten back to the house, grass-streaked and dirty.

A week later, John was found dead. Will's father packed up and moved him back to Louisiana the second his name was cleared.

"Do you believe in witches?" Will asks her. The crumble is quite good, he must admit. Deborah has a right to be proud. It's sweet and the tartness of the blackberries provides a nice counterpoint to it. He washes it down with whiskey and contemplates pouring it over the dessert as he eats.

She laughs. "No," she replies, shaking her head with a fond smile. "I don't need fairy tales."

"You were never read them? Your father never held you in his lap and told you dragons can be killed?"

Her smile softens, sad. "No," she says again. "It's men like you that teach us dragons can be killed."

Will huffs, taking another long swig of brandy. Winston and Addy are curled up at his feet. Their ears twitch whenever he speaks, but not when she does. Of course they don't – she's only a dream, after all. "Implying I see myself as some kind of knight?" he scoffs, bitterness hitting him harder than the alcohol ever could.

"What I say is up to you to interpret," she replies with a small, sly smile.

"A boy told me there was a witch who lived in the woods behind this house," Will says. "She left me a riddle, once."

"Did she." It's not a question. Her tone shows her skepticism as easily as if Will's own words had color. Synesthesia.

"Maybe." Will curls his fingers, looking at his wrist. He bites his lower lip and flattens his hand, so the scar doesn't show.

"Why did you buy this house?" she asks. Her eyes are dark now, faded. She always gets a little translucent when Will is tired. "Why did you come here, of all places?"

"This is where I began," Will replies. "This is what made me who I am."

"Because of the murder?"

"No," he says, and shakes his head. "Because of what the murder showed me."

Will's father died when he was eleven. He went into his uncle's care and lived with him and his seventeen-year-old Alpha son. His name was Chris. He was going to Louisiana College that fall on a football scholarship.

When his father died, the letters started. They had no return address on them but were expressly for Will. He remembers the first time he opened one and looked down at the

flowing script that was so foreign and so familiar, like an old dream.

"What is at the end of a rainbow?"

"A pot of gold," he'd said. He didn't know where to leave the letter, so he'd put it under his pillow. Witches didn't need to worry about things like postal codes and stamps. The letter had sat undisturbed for almost two weeks before Will received another.

"Try again."

But that's what they teach children, isn't it? A pot of gold, guarded by a leprechaun. Will had been distraught over figuring out the answer. His anxiety manifested itself in the form of snapping the rubber band around his wrist. He would tug and twist it while he read the riddle over and over again, trying to figure out what the right answer was. Snap, snap, *snap*. He broke the first one and replaced it with another – thicker, this time. More durable. *Snap*.

"They never solved that murder, you know. The boy who lived here."

"Really?" she asks, frowning.

Will smiles, and shakes his head. He's drunk, he knows he's drunk, but going out for a drive sounds like a good idea. He locks all of the windows and doors and throws the key down into the basement to dissuade himself from doing it.

"Yep," he replies, saluting with his whiskey bottle. "Everyone suspected had an air-tight alibi. Couldn't pin it on anyone. It was real violent, you know."

"I know," she says, "because you know."

"Maybe the witch did it," he says. "Y'know, he got too close to her house."

"I thought there were no such things as witches."

"You thought a lot of things," Will replies. "And now you're dead, and I'm not."

She smiles. "Yeah, you've got me there."

Will bares his teeth in a grin, slumping down at the small table by the window – one of the only pieces of furniture he's managed to haul in from his moving truck. The rest will come later, and he'll pay people to put it all inside for him. There are going to be contractors coming to fix the roof, an assessor for the water damage. He needs to buy a pump for the basement, and start looking at things like wallpaper swatches and paint samples.

It's so incredibly domestic. His shoulder hurts.

Snap.

Will's wrist is raw and chafed, a welt the size of a dime sitting just shy of the tendon in his wrist. He's close to tears, clutching at the piece of paper and reading the question over and over again.

"What is at the end of a rainbow?"

He looks up when he hears Chris coming up the stairs. They have to share a room and Will swallows as Chris falls against the door, a cut on his lip and the beginnings of a bruise around his eye. He smells like alcohol – not the kind decent people drink.

Chris smiles at him, fanged and red-eyed. "Hey, shrimp," he says. His words are slurring, and Will curls up tighter at the head of his bed, his eyes lowered. "Hey, hey, you wanna do somethin' cool?"

Will blinks, his eyes wide when he lifts his head again. Chris grins at him and reveals an open bottle of Fireball whiskey from behind his back. "If you're quiet, you can have a taste," he says. Will nods. His uncle is protective of him, sure that with his slender frame and demure bearing, he'll present as Omega. The kind people take advantage of.

Chris grins and plops down on the bed beside him, holding out the bottle. Will sets his paper down and takes it with both hands, tilting it up and taking a swig. The alcohol burns his throat and he sputters, coughing at the sour-cinnamon taste, and Chris laughs, taking it back from him. He's crowing with laughter and Will's cheeks are red, and Chris tilts the bottle back and takes one big gulp.

"What happened to your face?" Will asks.

"Some Alphas got handsy with a girl," Chris says. "Had to teach 'em a lesson."

Will frowns, his fingers curling around the rubber band at his wrist. *Snap.* "Is she okay?" he asks. Chris blinks at him, one eye then the other in an uncoordinated move. "The girl."

"Yeah," Chris says, all lopsided grin and feline Alpha pride. Will remembers hoping he presented Alpha, if only to get that kind of confidence. Chris is the kind of person that can easily be emulated. Will breathes a sigh of relief and looks down at his lap. "Whatcha lookin' at?"

Will bites his lower lip, and takes the piece of paper, holding it out to his cousin. Chris blinks at it, frowning, and lets out a guffawing laugh. "C'mon, shrimp, that's easy!" Will frowns. "'S'a 'W'!"

"A 'W'?" Will repeats.

"Yeah. The end of a rainbow. 'W'."

Chris takes another swig and Will looks down at his paper, worrying the side of his lower lip. Could that be the answer? "Thanks."

"No problem," Chris says, clapping him on the back hard enough to knock the breath out of him. He stands, sways, and makes his way over to his own bed. "Don't touch my whiskey while I'm asleep."

"I won't," Will mutters, when Chris sets the bottle down and slithers into bed. Will turns off his bedside lamp and instead takes a flashlight, pulling the covers over his head so he can write without disturbing his cousin. He writes 'W' at the bottom of the page and tucks it under his pillow as Chris starts to snore.

Will dreams about John, sometimes. He thinks about John's hands, how big they'd been, without calluses or scars. He thinks about John's pretty brown eyes, how they'd turn red whenever he got excited. John never touched him like that, but Will had been younger then, hadn't even been given the 'Birds and Bees' talk yet. He didn't know what people did to and for each other when the lights were off, and no one was home.

An Alpha feeling attraction for another Alpha isn't as rare as some people might think. Why wouldn't anyone want to date an Alpha? They were strong, and charming, and had the ability and desire to make you feel like the only person in the world. In Will's dreams, they're under that letterbox and Will is older, and they have a bottle of Fireball between their knees, and when John gets a little lax and smiles just right, his hands leave marks on Will's thighs.

Will wakes sweaty and shivering. She always leaves him alone on mornings like that. Will doesn't look at the bruises on his legs or his upper arms, doesn't pay too much attention to the fact that they don't look like something he could make himself.

"Well done, darling."

Will smiles, reading over the words, squirming with pleasure as he touches the long, arching letters across the page. He feels reverence in them, adoration. Something that can only be so keenly felt by one so young.

"Will," the letter reads. "Do you like to daydream?"

"Yes," Will writes back. He's started to leave his responses under the potted plant by the back door. He wouldn't want the witch to be annoyed by Chris' snoring.

"What kinds of things do you dream about?"

"I don't know. Anything. Everything."

"Do you have nightmares?"

"Sometimes."

"When your nightmares come, what are they of?"

"A shadow," Will writes one day. It's spring, the air is heavy with pending rain. Will hopes that the witch can still fly in the storm. "Sometimes I think it's you. When I do that, I'm not afraid anymore."

"That's good, my daydreamer. I don't want you to be afraid. You're very dear to me."

"Are you a witch?"

"No, dear one. I'm a man, flesh and blood like any other."

Will smiles. He'd begun to suspect.

"I like you, Shadow Man."

"And I like you, my dear Will. I have another puzzle for you, if you'd like to keep playing."

"Yes."

"You draw a line. Without touching it, how do you make the line longer?"

"Draw a shorter line. That way, the first line is longer."

"Very good, my daydreamer. Very good indeed."

Will finally makes it into town, once the crumble is gone and, more importantly, he runs out of booze. He needs food for the dogs, toys for them, needs to buy an electric fence – purely for legal reasons, really, Winston and Addy don't run off – and a water pump, and then arrange for contractors to come look at the house. He would rather do all of the repairs himself, but he's no electrician and he has no idea how to repair water damage, even if his shoulder would allow him to do it.

He drives to the hardware store first, goes inside and buys paint, rollers, tarps, and a hammer and nails because who honestly knows what kind of mess he's getting into when he gets going. At the counter, he spies a box of rubber bands and, after a moment, buys that too.

As he's driving to the grocery store he calls a local contractor and arranges for him to come by that afternoon to assess what needs to be done with the house. She's not with him today, and so he's alone with his thoughts and the static-filled country music station that seems to be the only thing not playing church radio.

He parks a little way away from the store and gets out, hissing at the bright light of the morning sun. He resists the urge to shield his eyes and wonders if the sun ever shone so brightly on Baltimore.

"Yoohoo! Will!"

Will freezes, turning to see Deborah waving frantically at him, hurrying across from the other side of the parking lot to reach him. He manages a thin smile as she approaches, and walks with him towards the grocery store. "What a coincidence!" she says brightly. Will gets the impression that most of the things she says require exclamation points.

"Is it?" he replies blandly, grabbing a shopping card from the racks in front of the store. She takes her own, apparently more than content to be his shadow as they enter the store and begin to navigate the aisles. Will bypasses the fresh produce section entirely, knowing it will likely spoil before he ever gets his hands on it. "Thank you again for the crumble. It was delicious."

"Well, there's more where that came from," Deborah replies with a delighted smile. She starts to peruse the canned fruit section and Will wonders where the line is between rudeness and practicality to try and separate from her. She grabs a can of fruit cocktail and several cans of sliced peaches before he manages to decide, and grins at him. "You have the woeful look of someone in dire need of proper feeding."

Will huffs. Deborah is just old enough to be considered matronly, and Will lived in Louisiana long enough to recognize a rabid mother-figure when he sees one. "I think I'm a lost cause," he replies, pushing his cart to the end of the aisle where the tuna and spam is.

"Well, you just need a woman in your life! Or an Omega," she adds, like an afterthought. "You know, our church does a social every Monday night. Lots of singles there. You should come to the next one and introduce yourself."

Will sighs, rubbing his hand over his face. He should pick up more aspirin in the medicine aisle too, before he leaves. And maybe buy a cheap wedding ring somewhere, to stave off conversations like this. Of course, in towns like this, people probably already know all about the unmated Alpha who moved into the abandoned murder house. People like Deborah tend to talk.

"I appreciate the offer," he says after a moment, when he realizes Deborah is still grinning at him, inane and unmoving. He takes some cans of tuna and spam off the shelves and places them in his cart. "I think it'd be best that I focus on the house, first. There's a lot of repair and upkeep that needs to be done."

"Of course! Well, the offer is always open. Have a nice day, Will," Deborah says with another frantic little wave, before she turns her cart down to the produce aisle and leaves Will to his own devices. Will races through the store, unwilling to remain in it with that too-friendly face. He gets dog food, milk, coffee – several bags of coffee, so much that the teenager behind the check-out station gives him a look of deep sympathy – and boxed meals for himself. He gets several bottles of aspirin, buys toilet paper, and several cases of beer. All in all, a very declarative statement about his current household, he imagines, and laughs to

himself when he thinks about how he would profile to someone who knew enough about human behavior to look.

"This psycho is stalking my nephew! Look at these Goddamn letters, they go back for months! How can you not do anything about it?"

"Look, Dave, I'm sorry, but my hands are tied. These letters aren't threatening. Maybe they're just -?"

Will freezes when he opens the door, stopping the conversation short between his uncle and a uniformed man. His uncle is red in the face, his fangs bared in anger, and when he looks at Will, his eyes are wild. He has several of Will's letters in his hand. "Will! Get over here right now!"

Will swallows, ducking his head meekly. His fingers curl around the rubber band on his wrist as he slowly walks over to the two men, who are standing in his uncle's kitchen. Will recognizes the uniformed man as one of his uncle's friends – Deputy Rodriguez.

Dave growls under his breath, rubs a hand over his face, and holds the letters out to Will. "Chris found these in your room," he says tightly. Will winces, snapping the rubber band against his wrist again. "Who are they from?"

"My...my friend," Will replies, flinching when his uncle lets out another sharp growl.

"Dave, let me," Detective Rodriguez says, holding up a hand. Will's uncle snaps his teeth together and sits, and the Detective takes the letters from him. He bends down so that he and Will are eye to eye. "Hey, Will," he says, his smile gentle. He's Omega, one of the few allowed on the force, out in the field. Will remembers there being a huge thing about it when it first happened. "Who's been sending these to you?"

Will bites his lower lip, shifts his weight, snaps the rubber band again with a dull noise. "I don't know his name," he replies. "He's my friend."

Will's uncle lets out a low, angry sound.

"When did your friend start writing to you?"

"After my dad died," Will replies. Detective Rodriguez smells sad – it stings Will's sensitive nose. He'll present soon, if his sense of smell is getting so good. He rubs his hand under his nose and sniffs, his chest tight with anxiety because he knows he's in trouble, he knows he shouldn't have hidden Shadow Man's letters, but they had felt special. They were *his*, and only his, and now other people know about them too and it feels like they shouldn't.

"So you've never met him?" Detective Rodriguez asks gently. Will shakes his head and sniffs again, snapping the rubber band in a series of three. "Has he ever suggested you two meet face-to-face?"

"No," Will says.

The Detective nods, straightening. "Thank you, Will. I'm gonna have a talk with your uncle here, alright? Do you have homework?" Will nods. "You do it in your room?" Will nods again. "Alright, why don't you go upstairs?"

Will nods a final time, fleeing from the kitchen and up the stairs in an effort to escape the heat of his uncle's wrath. He pulls off his shoes and flings himself on his bed, curling up tightly around his pillow. He lets out a shaky breath, his nails digging into the welts on his wrist and scratching at them mercilessly. He pulls the rubber bands, twists and tugs on them until his wrist hurts and his left hand starts to tingle and go numb.

He can hear his uncle's voice, carrying up through the vent in his room. He sits up, pushes his backpack off his shoulders, and crawls to the vent, head tilted to try and hear better;

"Some deranged psycho is stalking my nephew and sending him *riddles*, Carlos. For *months*. What do you think would have happened if this guy tried to get Will to contact him back? To meet? He'd be another milk carton kid before you could blink."

"Dave, I understand your concern, but as far as the law goes, there's nothing I can do. We don't have any evidence that this man intends Will harm, and unfortunately I can't do anything until that changes." There's a pause, then a sigh. "You can only teach Will to be wary of strangers, to be cautious about this friend of his. It might not be as bad as you think."

"Oh?"

"Kids think differently than we do," Detective Rodriguez says. "This could be just another kid, trying to provide Will some comfort and friendship after the loss of his father."

"You name *one* kid his age that calls their friends 'My dear' or 'Darling' and I'll believe you."

Will bites his lower lip, standing, and goes to his backpack. He opens it and pulls out another stack of Shadow Man's letters, bound by two rubber bands and two paperclips to hold it all together. These are the ones Will hides better and carries with him wherever he goes. These are the ones that came with gifts.

The first; "Shadow Man, are you an Alpha?"

"Why do you ask, my daydreamer?"

"I feel like it's important."

"My darling, whatever you turn out to be, I promise my regard will not waiver. We are more than just gender and sex. What binds us to this world pales in comparison to the next." That letter had come with a sketch – of the tree with the letterbox. Will bites his lower lip and rubs his fingertips gently over the 'Look up' carved into the base of it.

Then; "Shadow Man, I had a bad dream."

"What was it about?"

"I saw my friend John. He was crying and bleeding. I tried to help him, but I was too small. Too weak."

"You know what we must do, when we are too small and too weak to help those we care about?"

"What?"

"We make ourselves bigger, and stronger, so that it does not happen the next time."

That letter came with chocolate, a brand Will had never seen before. They were fancy and very sweet, and the box looked like it was made of gold. To this day Will remembers the flavor of the salted caramel as it coated his tongue.

"I have a question for you, Will. What do you believe happens to us when we die?"

"My Daddy told me that there's a God, and if we're good, we get to be with Him in paradise and all our friends and family are there too, and we live happily ever after."

"Is that what you believe?"

"I don't believe in fairy tales. I read about bugs, and what happens to bodies when they're dead. Did you know that skin and nails growing is a myth? They don't grow. Our skin just shrinks."

"That's very interesting, Will. I can tell you're very smart. Would you like another riddle?"

"Yes."

"Name four days of the week that start with the letter 'T'."

"Tuesday, Thursday, Today, and Tomorrow."

"Very good, daydreamer. I shall have to think of harder games for us to play."

Will brings in the groceries. She's there, smiling at him, bright and happy in a way he rarely sees her. He responds with a smile of his own, lets out Winston and Addy, and then goes to the moving trailer still attached to his car, opening it with the intention of bringing more things inside.

"Need any help?" she asks.

Will huffs a breath, shouldering a box of books. "Smartass," he replies.

She laughs, loud enough that if it were real, the birds would fly from the trees. Will brings the first box inside, then goes out for the second. He spends most of the afternoon unloading the

trailer, so that by the time he's almost finished, the contractor's truck pulls up the driveway and stops behind his car.

"Afternoon!" the man greets, stepping out. The Alpha approaches him and shakes his hand. "Name's Harrison."

"Will," Will replies.

Harrison smiles, and looks up at the house, letting out a low whistle and threading his thumbs through his belt loops in a move so clichéd Will wants to laugh. "Mighty fixer-upper you got here," he says.

"Yeah, a kid was murdered in it almost thirty years ago," Will says brightly. "Hasn't seen much love since."

"I remember," Harrison says, soft and muted. Will thinks he doesn't look old enough to remember something like that. "My father was the lead Detective on the case. Never did find the sonuvabitch." Then, he straightens, and claps his hands together. "Shall we?"

"Do what you gotta do," Will says, gesturing for Harrison to go inside and start looking around. Will hasn't started putting up furniture or unpacking the boxes so he's not afraid of having to move stuff around for Harrison to do his work.

As the Alpha goes inside, Will's phone rings. He answers it. "Alana?" She's the only one he gave his number to.

"Hey," Alana breathes, and Will admits his chest loosens and his mouth twitches in a smile at the sound of her voice. "It's been a while. Just wanted to check in."

Translation: Just wanted to make sure you haven't lost your mind yet.

"How are you?"

"Good," Will replies. He goes to his car and leans against the hood, keeping an eye on his dogs as they roll around in the long grass. He needs to get a lawnmower, too. Maybe he'll hire a lawn service to do the first round and have mercy on his shoulder. "Already met some of the neighbors and even managed to go to the grocery store all by myself."

She huffs a sheepish laugh. "No need for that," she says, chiding but playful.

Will hums, and blows a stray curl out of his face. "How's life in the big city?" he asks.

"More of the same," Alana replies. "I think Jack's taking bets on how long it takes you to go stir crazy and come back."

"I wanna get in on that," Will says. "But fifty on 'Never'."

She laughs. "Well, it's good to see you've still got a sense of humor."

"I try," Will replies dryly. It really is good to hear her voice. Will hadn't realized how much he'd missed her. Abruptly, his chest feels tight again, and he heaves in a breath. "I've got a contractor looking at the house right now. There's some water damage and it needs a new roof. Should be a fun project."

"I'm happy for you, Will," Alana murmurs. "Really. I'm just sad you had to go through so much to get here."

"We all have our demons," Will says after a moment. The trees sway with the light breeze, lush and green. The air out here smells alive and wet, rain and dirt and life and Will is quickly falling in love with it. "When it's ready, I have a guest room, if you wanted to come visit."

"I'd like that," she replies warmly.

Will pauses, frowning. "Really?" he asks.

"Of course," Alana says. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I guess I assumed you'd want distance."

"Distance only matters when there's something to compare it to." Will huffs, smiling down at his feet. "But, full disclosure; I met someone."

"Oh?" Will asks. "What's his name?"

"Margot," Alana replies, a smile in her voice.

Will huffs a laugh. "She pretty?"

"Stop it," Alana says, laughing.

"I guess we both have earned congratulations."

"I suppose we have." She pauses, and then sighs. "I have to go. Can I call you later?"

"Always," Will replies. She bids him a good afternoon and ends the call, and Will sighs again, pocketing his phone. He goes into the house to see Harrison coming down the stairs.

"The water damage has gotten down to this floor," he says by way of greeting. Will likes this guy – he's straight and to the point. "It reaches this wall, here," he adds, gesturing to the wall separating the kitchen from the living space where Will has set up his table and chairs. "Honestly, though, this isn't a load bearing wall. I'd recommend we just knock the whole thing down, get some light and space in here."

Will nods. Less places to hide, better sight lines. "Works for me," he says. "What about the roof?"

"I'd have to get one of my guys to take a closer look, but water damage means there's probably a hole somewhere. We'd have to replace the whole thing."

"I'm not worried about money, if that's where you're going with this," Will says.

Harrison nods. "I was about to go check the basement," he says, and Will nods and follows him to the entrance to the basement, under the stairs. He opens the door and flicks the switch, a single lightbulb illuminating what is essentially a concrete cell within. They go down the creaking, rickety stairs, and Harrison takes a flashlight from his belt, holding it up to reveal a few puddles in the center. He lets out a low whistle. "Gonna need to get a pump in here."

"It's on my to-do list," Will replies.

"That's good," Harrison says. "Well, aside from the obvious siding issue, that's all I can really see wrong with the place. It's an old house, but sturdy. They don't build 'em like this anymore."

"Well, as soon as the roof is assessed, and we have a quote, I'd like you to get started. Assuming you don't have any other projects pending."

"No, Sir," Harrison says with a smile, leading the way back up the stairs. Will turns the light off and shuts the door. "I'll call my guy. Can probably come back out first thing tomorrow."

"Great. Thanks," Will says, and shakes Harrison's hand again. The man gives him a nod and returns to his truck and drives away.

Will watches him go, and then turns his attention to the trees. He sighs, and whistles for Winston and Addy to come back inside and closes and locks the door behind them.

After Will's uncle had found his letters, they stopped. Will hadn't been able to leave notes under the potted plant anymore. He became sullen and distant in school, started snapping at his uncle and Chris. They chalked it up to hormones, but Will knew better.

He missed his friend.

Violence. The air stinks of violence. Cold, calculated malice. What had John done to deserve such a severe beating? His hands were flayed, his limbs spread out like a starfish. Naked, face-down. He'd been castrated, and a big chunk of his leg was missing. His kidney, too, Will would find out later. His face had been split apart, his charming smile turned Cheshire cat-like, jaw cracked, and lips torn away so that all of his teeth were exposed, like someone tried to peel back his face.

Will remembers finding the body. The killer hadn't tried to hide it. Will had sat on the edge of the pool of blood, knowing even then that he shouldn't touch the body or tamper with it in any way.

He wanted to play with John's hair.

John's pretty eyes were clouded in death, grey and blueish like old fish. Blood turns dark after a while, almost brown when it starts to dry. Will didn't know that it did that. There were deep lines raked into his back like he'd tried to get away and had been clawed down to the ground.

He bit his lower lip, snapped the rubber band around his wrist. It hurt where the paperclip was tucked into it.

"John?" he'd called. "Come on. Stop playing."

Will remembers feeling like he was being watched, that day. John's throat had been slit, his neck bitten like someone had torn out his throat after cutting him. Who would do such a thing to this unassuming young man? The rage was clinical, in the way the wrath of an avenging Angel is far removed from the emotions of men.

Will presented as Alpha on the night of his sixteenth birthday. He remembers crying and snapping the rubber band against his wrist so hard that it bled.

He remembers thinking how much he had wanted to be like John, to be like Chris. He should have been happy, but he wasn't. His friend didn't write to him – or if he did, Will's uncle intercepted it, so Will would never see.

But the next morning, Will went to school, and found a small box of that same chocolate in his locker. He didn't eat it until that night, fingers trembling around the letter that had been folded within the box;

"My daydreamer, I've missed you dearly. I wish I could have been there to see you becoming a man."

That was the first time Will touched himself, beyond absent rutting in a fever dream into his pillows and sheets. He'd folded himself under his blanket, his flashlight between his teeth as he read Shadow Man's neat, arcing script, wrapped his hand around his cock and trembled at the idea of hearing the man saying those words. Of feeling his teeth in Will's neck.

Growing up in Louisiana, the rights of Omegas were still new founded, and even those were far beyond those for gay people, or anyone on the spectrum. It was refreshing to read Shadow Man's letters and know that he was loved, beyond flesh, beyond gender identity. Still, Will couldn't help hating the feeling of his knot in his hand when his orgasm struck him, for he was sure at that point that Shadow Man was an Alpha too, and how could they possibly be together, in a world such as this?

"You know, I could probably conjure his ghost, too. As I remember him."

"But you don't remember him," she says. "Not really. He's been idealized too much, and he's still a child in your mind."

Will huffs, sniffing, and downs another large mouthful of Fireball. He thinks back to the first time he tried it and laughs. How things change. "I miss him," he whispers.

"John?" she asks.

Will bites his lower lip and shakes his head.

She smiles at him, and reaches out to gently touch his hand. "Why did you buy this house? Really?"

There was no witch in the woods. Just Shadow Man. "You know the answer," he replies.

She smiles, nodding. "I do," she says. "So, then, do you."

"You told me I can't replace people without bringing in someone else to fill their space," Will says. She tilts her head to one side, and nods. "What if I replaced you with Shadow Man?"

"I think he would make you happier."

"Do you want to die?"

"I'm already dead," she says mildly. Will nods, sighing, and takes another drink.

Then, he stands. If Shadow Man is here, Will knows where to find him.

The trees are so overgrown that, at first, Will isn't really sure where the fence is supposed to be. He finds it eventually, wincing when the branches claw at his face and hands. There's nettles growing around a small gate and he kicks at them enough to open it, closing it behind him. There's a trail here, overgrown but barely present, and he takes out his flashlight. The sun is still up, but it'll be dark soon, and the trees will not let in enough light for him to see by as time goes on.

He follows the trail, half-memories stirring in his head as he heads up a steep verge, out of breath before he reaches the top. The day is cold but within the brush and trees, a sweltering heat lingers like the exhale of a large beast, waiting for him to crawl close enough that it can snap its jaws and swallow him whole.

He follows the trail, wincing when he stumbles on roots and rocks that are hidden underneath a thick layer of fallen leaves, old and moist under his boots. The trees brush along his arms and face like the embrace of an old friend, pulling him deeper into the forested area until he finds it.

The tree.

The words are still there. 'Look up'. Only now, it also says 'Will'.

Will lets out a breathless laugh and lifts his flashlight to reveal the letterbox. It's covered in ivy and he steps up to it, pleased to note that he's tall enough to reach it now without climbing. He pulls the vines away and opens the letterbox.

There's a piece of paper inside. It looks like it's been well-protected by the rain, but it's clearly old and Will unfolds it carefully, gasping when he sees that familiar script. It's like the ink itself holds touch, holds memory.

It has the same riddle as the first; "I am tall when I'm young, and short when I'm old. What am I?", and underneath, his response; "A candle". But it's not the original paper – Will can tell, because the candle response is written in the same handwriting. Shadow Man must have been replacing it all this time.

Underneath is a new riddle; "Two mothers and two daughters went out to eat, everyone ate one burger, yet only three burgers were eaten in all. How is this possible?"

Will smiles, and pulls out a pen from his pocket. He puts his flashlight between his teeth, braces the paper on the edge of the box, and writes; "Grandmother, mother, daughter."

Then, he adds; "I missed you, Shadow Man."

The letters kept coming to Will's school instead, along with more gifts. More chocolate, and sometimes little origami figurines made from matchboxes and pieces of notepaper. Sometimes sketches of Will's house, and his school. Will cherished each gift, fell in love with each new letter he found in his locker. It never troubled him, how this man was getting into his school, how he knew where Will lived, what he wanted from Will. When there's no fear, questions become mundane and ordinary. As impossible as it was, there was a connection there; a trust. Will's father and his uncle had taught him about Stranger Danger, but Shadow Man wasn't a stranger. He was a friend, a trusted confidante that Will could tell all of his secrets to.

"Shadow Man, what does love feel like?"

"I can't be sure, daydreamer. What do you think it feels like?"

"Science tells us it's chemicals. Things our brain creates to make us feel bonded to the object of our desires and affection."

"And do you believe that?"

"If I did, that means that love is only physical. I can't believe that's true. I've never touched you, or seen you, or heard your voice. But I think I love you. Is that possible?"

"As possible and real as my love is for you, my dear Will. I believe it's fascination, and awareness, and no one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them. By that love, we see potential in our beloved. Through that love, we allow our beloved to see their potential. Expressing that love, our beloved's potential comes true."

"I don't know what my potential is."

"Would you like to find out?"

"Yes. Desperately."

"One day, you and I will return to where this all began. We will stand as we did all those years ago, with nothing but potential in front of us. When that day comes, I would see you realized."

"As I would see you."

"Then you must learn, first, my darling Will. The things I want to show you, you must first learn how to see."

Looking back, Will knows he didn't stand a Goddamn chance. No one sees a body so viciously executed so young and comes back from it. And no one gets letters like he did and grows up with a view of the world that suits upstanding citizens.

He thinks of words like 'grooming' and 'socialization'. Shadow Man is a predator, of that Will has no doubt, but is it so unfair for Will to blame him entirely on what he turned out to be? He is a man with monsters in his head, and only the man who controls monsters has brought him any semblance of peace.

He wakes to a knock on his door, and groans, pushing himself upright and trailing down the stairs, a ghost in his own home. Winston and Addy are at the door, tails wagging wildly, and they bark when they see Will.

He shushes them and opens the door to see Harrison and another man standing there. Harrison gives him a nod of greeting that Will returns. "Came to check out that roof," the second man says, and Will nods again, stepping back to allow them room to enter. He lets Winston and Addy go outside and leaves the door open.

"This was taped to your door," Harrison says, and holds out a thin envelope for Will. On it, in script dark and familiar, is the word 'Daydreamer'. Will's breath catches, and he snatches the envelope from Harrison, ravenous to see what's inside.

Harrison blinks at him, but doesn't comment, and follows his companion up the stairs.

Will's hands are shaking, his breathing unsteady. He was here. He was *here*, on Will's doorstep. If Will had known he was coming, he would have left the door unlocked. He

collapses on one of his chairs and opens the envelope with trembling but gentle hands, and pulls out a slip of paper covered in the same dark script.

"I've missed you too, daydreamer," he reads. His heart stutters in his chest and he gasps, covering his mouth with his hand as his eyes burn. Will has never gone red before, never succumbed to the Alpha instinct that colors their irises and turns them into beasts, but the prickling behind his eyes is unmistakable. He takes a deep breath and tries to calm his unsteady heartbeat, his sweaty palms. He can't tell if it's excitement or something else that's robbing him of the ability to think.

She appears at his side, and puts a hand on his shoulder. "What does it say?" she asks.

Will swallows, and flattens the letter on the table, trying to get his eyes to focus.

"I've missed you too, daydreamer," he begins, reading the first sentence again. "Terribly so. I lost you for so long, to other men, to other monsters. But I never left your side, you must believe that. I've watched you grow and flourish, but your transformation has been hampered. I see you like a light, in danger of being snuffed out. I would see you burn for me again, as you did all those years ago."

Will swallows, his throat tight.

"I have another puzzle for you, if you'd like to play. This one will be very difficult, but I believe you and you alone will be able to solve it. The puzzle comes in two parts. If you are ready, and if you want to be with me once again, show me. I'll be waiting."

Will feels frozen for a long moment after reading the letter. His hands still shake, and it's only when she circles the table and comes into his field of vision that he lets himself move. He raises his eyes, his head burning, and swallows harshly enough that his throat clicks.

"He's disappointed in me," he says.

She tilts her head to one side, frowning. "If he's disappointed, that means he still cares," she says, too-kindly.

Will sucks in another unsteady breath, and looks at the plastic bag of stuff he bought from the hardware store that would fit inside. The hammer, nails, and rubber bands are in the bag.

"We must stand as we were, all those years ago," he breathes. He reaches into the bag and takes out the box of rubber bands. His eyes fall to the scar on his wrist, he sucks in a breath and lets it out, unsteadily. He opens the box and takes out three thin bands, and twists them until they each snap, breaking into one long line each. Then he braids them together, and fashions them into an anchor bend.

She frowns at the knot when he's finished. Will turns the paper over and grabs his pen.

"Do you think he'll understand?"

"He's my anchor," Will replies, scrawling out his reply. "He understands me better than anyone."

She smiles, weakly, and Will stands, hurrying out of his house and towards the back fence. Winston barks, following him to the gate, and lets out a whine when Will shuts it behind him.

"It's okay, boy," he says. "He won't hurt me."

He goes to the letter box and stuffs the paper and knot inside.

"I'm ready."

He returns to see Harrison and his companion outside, looking for him. Harrison gives him an uneasy smile as Will returns – Will is sure he looks a mess, barefoot, feet covered in nettle stings, leaves and dirt in his hair and smeared on his face.

"Um, we assessed your roof, Sir, and looks like we'll need to replace it."

"Alright," Will says. "So there's that, new siding, knocking down the wall, and the water damage. How much you think it's gonna be?"

"Well, since it's so much work, I can do a package deal for ya. Parts plus labor, I'd put it around twenty-five by the time we're all done. We'll need ten down."

Will nods. "How soon can you get started?"

Harrison blinks at him, then looks to his friend. "Well, I can go back into town, order the shingles and the siding. That'll take a while, but we can start on the wall and the water damage as soon as the roof's fixed. Say next week?"

"That works," Will says, and shakes Harrison's hand, then his companion's. "I appreciate it, gentlemen. Thank you."

"It's no problem," Harrison says with another nod. "I'll call you when we've got the order in and can get started."

"Good," Will replies. "Let me get my checkbook."

The next morning sees Will sprinting to the letterbox, eager to see what Shadow Man has left inside. He isn't disappointed.

Inside the box is another gift, this time of chocolate and a bottle of what looks like expensive red wine. Will can't even pronounce the name of the winery on the label. He huffs a laugh, rolling his eyes, and takes out the letter.

"Oh, my daydreamer, you've made me very happy. As I said before, this puzzle comes in two parts. The first part must be solved before you can answer the second. During this time, I will answer your questions, as long as they do not give away the answer. And that answer will lead you to me. I can't wait to meet you, darling."

Will smiles, turning and leaning against the tree. He wipes his hand over his mouth and heaves a happy, giddy sigh, and turns the paper over to reveal the question;

"Why did I kill John?"

Will blinks at the words, brow furrowing. He tilts his head to one side and checks the inside of the letterbox, sure that he must have missed something. But there's nothing inside. He steps back, looking down at the sheet of paper again, and huffs.

He fights back his first instinct; denial. Shadow Man wouldn't confess to a crime he didn't commit. He's not interested in that kind of subterfuge. Nor is he posing a hypothetical like Will did in his lectures, asking his students to become the killer to try and understand their motivations.

No, this is a confession. 'I killed John. Tell me why'.

Will presses his lips together, his fingers curling tight enough that the paper crinkles.

Why indeed.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Wow guys, I am blown away by the response to this fic! Thank you for indulging my creepastic ideas :D

Will sits at his dining room table, two thick rubber bands wrapped around his left wrist. He plays with them idly, pulling them away from his skin and letting them snap against the second welt already forming just shy of the old scar. Whenever he does it, his fingers twitch.

"Why did I kill John?"

Snap.

Across from him, she sits, frowning down at the flat piece of paper with Shadow Man's neat script darkening the lines. It's calligraphy, beautiful arching lines made by a steady hand, a self-assuredness that Will likes. He has never been that confident.

"Jealousy?" she suggests.

Will sighs, and shakes his head. "Too pedestrian."

Leaving a body face down is a sign of remorse. He couldn't look his victim in the eye, when it was done, although Will know with the amount of damage done to John's face, that may have just been a practical decision. If he was truly sorry, he would have posed John like they do to people in caskets. He wouldn't have left John naked.

Snap.

"You're going to hurt yourself, if you keep doing that."

"Helps me think," he mutters, tugging on the rubber bands again. He's not sure what time of night it is, but it is night – the darkness sliding in between his open curtains shows him a black driveway, a river of ash that makes up the road. Will leaves his door unlocked, now.

She huffs a breath, sitting back in her chair and folding her arms across her chest. "You sure it's not jealousy?" she asks. "If he knew about your crush..."

"He wouldn't do that," Will replies. She doesn't look convinced. "Eight-year-olds don't understand things like possessiveness when it comes to people. I didn't, at least. Not back then."

"That doesn't mean he didn't."

"No," Will says, shaking his head. "He wouldn't have done something that I couldn't understand."

He recalls the image of John's body. Time has tamed the memory, coloring the edges in blurred sepia. Everything looks brown, down to the dark bloodstain. It had soaked the carpet so deeply that the floorboards in the hallway are still kind of pink. He sits forward, releasing the rubber bands, and rubs his hands through his hair.

"When was the last time you slept?" she asks.

That's a good question. Will isn't sure how many hours have passed since Harrison and his friend departed, leaving Will alone with his dogs and his hallucinations and this piece of paper. It might have been days. Underneath it is Shadow Man's first letter since his return to Maryland; the one taped to his door, addressed to 'Daydreamer'. His chest gets warm.

"I need this case file," he whispers.

She lets out a short, aggravated sound. "Why did you come here?" she demands, and when Will looks up, her brow is low and furrowed in anger, her eyes bright with frustration. "You're no farther from Baltimore than you were from Wolf Trap. You came here to find Shadow Man again, and he's throwing you back into the very work you fled so desperately from."

He bites the side of his lower lip, and sighs.

"Did you really want to leave? Or did you just want to talk to him again?"

"Stop," Will growls, his fingers curling against the table on either side of the paper. He doesn't dare crinkle or harm it. Every word from Shadow Man is precious. "If you're so angry with me, then leave. No one's stopping you."

She doesn't answer, but Will can feel her anger like a wave of heat on his face. At his feet, Winston is resting, warming Will's nettle-stung soles with his soft fur. His feet sting and ache. Addy is on a dog bed by the door, keeping guard like she knows the door is unlocked and at any moment someone could come into the house and try to do them harm.

Will isn't afraid of being hurt. He's afraid of disappointment. Of *being* a disappointment.

"I have to figure this out," he tells her. "It's the only way."

"You don't have to play his game," she says archly. "This is just a game to him. He's *toying* with you."

"No," Will replies vehemently. He will not let his own subconscious cast doubt. Shadow Man has never lied to him, not once. He's Will's friend. He understands.

Who would want to kill a sixteen-year-old boy?

John's boyfriend had been older, but not by much. Not enough to make people blink an eye. High school sweethearts, if Will remembers correctly. Will had only met the other boy once; he'd been pretty, in that way eight-year-olds notice pretty things. His eyes were the color of springtime sky and his hair was long, blonde. Will remembers his smile, but not much else.

John's throat was cut, his neck bitten badly. Could have been a mating bite – some Omegas are fierce enough to rival their Alpha counterparts. He'd had an alibi for John's death, Will is sure of that, otherwise he would have been arrested. The spurned or jealous lover is too easy.

John's parents, too, had been gone that day. At least a dozen people put them on the docks at the time of death, as well as Will's father. Will was never a suspect. He'd been too small, too weak, to overpower someone like John.

His hands were flayed. A mark of offense. He was dirty and marred everything he touched. That's what Will wants to think, but that speaks too much of jealousy, and he can't imagine what Shadow Man had been jealous about.

There'd been a fight, but no defensive wounds. Unless cutting his hands meant that they weren't detectable. Maybe John had fought back, bruised and bloodied his knuckles and landed a few bites of his own before he'd died.

Shadow Man would have had to be stronger. Bigger. Will shivers and presses his thighs together tightly at the flood of warmth that thought brings. A big, strong Alpha, ready and willing to do away with the competition.

But there's no competition. John wasn't gay – at least, Will never sensed that about him. Maybe he was too young.

"Why did I kill John?"

Maybe it didn't matter that it was John. The significance of the victim is just as important when there's no personal connection as when there is.

"Shadow Man, how did you find me?"

After all, there'd been no letters from the time Will was eight to when he was eleven. Something must have changed, something to draw Shadow Man's notice again.

"I read about the death of your father, and recognized his picture," came the reply. "My deepest condolences, daydreamer. No one should be orphaned so young."

So, with his father's death, Will had come back onto Shadow Man's radar. As strange as it had been, Will could no longer think of his father's death as a loss, but as a blessing, for it was through him that Shadow Man came back into his life.

When he was younger, it didn't trouble him to wonder just how Shadow Man had recognized his father's picture. Nor had it occurred to him to worry about the fact that, somehow, Shadow Man had been able to track him down just from an obituary.

Perhaps he'd been at the funeral.

"You left me for three years."

"Did I leave you, or did you leave me?"

"At that age, I had little choice."

"We always have a choice, darling. It is the decisions we make that shape us into who we are."

"Don't leave me again. I won't if you won't."

"I'll hold you to that, my daydreamer."

Will wakes in a cold sweat, his chest heaving and his lips parting, gasping past the feeling of hands at his throat, tightening with every tremble of his lungs, like a snake would when coiling around its prey. He runs both hands through his hair, his thighs aching, and he sits up, looking down at his exposed legs. There are bruises just above his knees, like someone tried to push them apart while he was sleeping.

Winston and Addy are by the door, guarding it, their dark eyes watchful. Will doesn't hear movement. No one was here.

Unless.

"No," he growls to himself. He can't let himself think like that. If he stops trusting his senses, then his perception will quickly follow.

He pushes himself to his feet and balls up the sweat-soaked sheets, sighing when he realizes he might start needing to make use of towels again so that his mattress stands a chance of making it through the month. He throws his sheets in the hamper, shrugs off his t-shirt and underwear, and crosses the hall into the bathroom on the opposite side.

He turns on the light, the fan kicking into action with a coughing whirl. He sighs, rubbing his hands over his face, and starts the water at the faucet. The guest bathroom has a tub, though it's small, not big enough for a man to comfortably stretch out but large enough for him to sit in with his legs bent. After a moment, he stoppers the water and steps into the tub, hissing at the scalding temperature, and lowers himself down to a seated position.

His shampoo and body wash are still packed up somewhere; he's been relying on just the water to keep himself clean enough to be seen in public. Not that he particularly cares what

outside image he projects to this town. He's already an oddity, as a single Alpha with no obvious ties to the town moving into the murder house. It would probably help his image and keep too-friendly people away if he were to always remain a little unkempt.

He has no room in his life for prey animals.

A smile ghosts across his face as he imagines that, one day, children might refer to *him* as the witch in the woods.

The water licks up the sides of the tub and he turns the handle so it's a little cooler, enough that his skin turns pink but doesn't burn. The nettle stings on his feet ache like hives and he bites his lower lip, curling his toes. The red dots look like constellations, the lighter rash the afterglow of the Milky Way.

He waits until the water is up to his heart and then turns it off, leaning back and bending his knees tight enough that he can submerge himself to the throat. The water sloshes around in the tub, laves at his shoulders and forearms, the tender welt at his wrist. He closes his eyes and lets himself soak as the water cools to something a little more bearable.

He sighs, cupping his hands and letting the water pour over his face, running his fingers through his hair to try and tame it back and warm the cold sweat clinging to his temples. He needs to shave soon; his beard is starting to get long.

As that thought registers, Will's fingers curl, and he runs his nails down the side of his neck. He shivers, imagining that it's teeth. An Alpha's teeth. He has always wanted to know what it feels like to bite someone, to receive one in turn, when bodies are crushed together tight enough that nothing might separate them; not time, or gravity, or society. Will's thighs tense and when his free hand runs down the inside of his left thigh, from knee to tender innards, he feels small twinges of muscle ache from bruises that could have been laid by no other hand but his own.

They couldn't have, but that doesn't mean he can't pretend.

He digs his nails around the tendon in his thigh, biting his lower lip as his knees spread as much as they can in the narrow tub. It gives his hand just enough room to cup his balls, and he pulls his other hand away from his neck, wrapping it around the thickening shaft of his cock. At times like this Will would sell his soul to have a second set of hands on him – one in his hair, tight and controlled, the other at his neck to measure his breaths and the rate of his heart.

On the eve of Will's eighteenth birthday, Shadow Man mailed a package to his doorstep, or left it there. Early enough for Will to get it first, before his uncle came home. He recognized the writing immediately and took it upstairs, pulling the blankets of his bed over his head and turning on his flashlight to read the words – a habit he had never broken, even when Chris went off to college and Will inherited sole ownership of the bedroom.

Inside the box was a small see-through envelope, within it a series of pressed flowers. Will would later be able to identify them after asking the florist by his school what each one was.

An Amaryllis flower; splendid beauty, and worth beyond beauty. A Bird of Paradise, for joyfulness, magnificence, and exciting and wonderful anticipation. Freesia, for innocence and thoughtfulness. Queen Anne's Lace for sanctuary and complexity.

Finally, a sunflower. Pure thoughts, adoration, and dedication.

Below the flowers was a single piece of card stock, darkened with Shadow Man's beautiful script. Will's fingers had trembled with anticipation when he pulled it out to read it.

"My daydreamer, tomorrow you enter into the world of adults. If I had my way, I would come for you tonight and spirit you away, but neither of us are ready for that. There is still much that we both must learn before we can be together."

Even before learning the meaning of the flowers, Will had understood what Shadow Man was saying. It was a declaration of love, as powerful and binding as a bite to Will's nape or a ring on his finger. Will remembers feeling like his heart might stop beating if he breathed too loud.

He knew Shadow Man would not come for him that night, but he still had a dream when the sun set, of dark hands and teeth stuck fierce in his throat. He woke sweaty, his stomach and hand covered in his seed, his lungs burning with the desire to cry out the name of a man he doesn't know.

Will had gotten better at hiding the letters and gifts from his uncle. After the confrontation with his uncle and Detective Rodriguez, Will was forced to be smarter. They say overprotective parents just make better liars and criminals out of their children, and Will was no exception to that rule.

"It is time for you to learn. You must be able to see everything I want to show you. I have the utmost faith that you will continue to impress me. I can't wait to see what kind of man you become."

Will shivers, the only sound the movement of the water as he tightens his hand on the head of his cock, twists it to feel the tightness, the calluses from his gun rubbing under the sensitive head. He leans his head back on the edge of the tub, his shoulder aching sharply as he tightens his other hand on his balls, pulling on them gently to draw himself back from the edge.

He thinks of large hands, burning hot. Big and strong enough to tear an Alpha limb from limb. He'll be taller than Will, older, refined. A man who sends his beloved pressed flowers like some kind of Regency proposal doesn't do anything in half measures. An old soul with a

penchant for violence. Will imagines teeth at his nape, biting down hard around the tendon like he's an Omega that needs to be mounted.

He bites his lower lip and swallows back a moan, the skin that isn't in the water turning red and damp with sweat and humidity. He runs his hand down his cock again, fingers brushing along the half-formed swell of his knot. He's always been sensitive, and when he touches it, his breath leaves him in a soundless gasp.

He'll have dark eyes, to hide the sins inside of them. Red, of course, to denote him as Alpha. Will imagines a strong jaw, broad shoulders, fangs large enough to rip his throat out if he so chose.

Shadow Man isn't the jealous type, but that is because he doesn't believe in competition. He would touch Will with the casual possessiveness he might hold a glass of wine, or fit his hands against the steering wheel of his car. Will's heart is a prized possession, bleeding and still beating in his hands when Will offers it to him.

He whimpers, his jaw tensing, baring his teeth as his gut sinks in and the flutter of arousal in his stomach turns sharp. His shoulder hurts, protesting the tension of his arms and the awkward curl of his back against the edge of the tub, but Will can't stop now.

He flattens his hand over his knot, tugs on the base of his cock lightly, and releases his balls to gently slide his fingertips between his legs, brushing over his tight, dry hole. Will can't get wet like women and Omegas can, but he will do whatever he needs to if his mate wants it of him. He can part his body like he parted his mind, and let Shadow Man in.

He gasps, trembling, and slides the tip of one finger inside his body. His stomach clenches, sinks in, and he feels his orgasm sweep over him like water over his flesh. His back arches violently enough that the water churns around him, lipping over the edge of the tub and onto the tiles on the outside, like the water is trying to escape the frantic beat of his heart.

He pulls his finger out and wraps his hand around the head of his cock, tightening as much as he can and rubbing his knot with his other hand until it starts to hurt, until the aftershocks turn painful and his mind is swimming in bliss. Without being stuck inside a woman or Omega, his knot doesn't swell as large as it can, and doesn't last for very long. He keeps touching himself until his knot goes back down and the water has turned milky from his release.

Hands shaking, he takes in a deep breath, and pushes himself up and out of the water. He pulls out the plug and lets it drain, and stands on the wet tile floor, drip-drying, his eyes on his reflection in the fogged bathroom mirror.

He clears his throat, the flush of shame familiar when it comes, as it always does when Will indulges his fantasies of laying with another Alpha. He thinks of how disappointed Shadow Man would be with him, if he knew how dark Will's mind gets, too-long flayed with thoughts of impropriety and being taught that an Alpha wanting another Alpha is unnatural.

A product of growing up in the Bible belt.

He sighs, takes the towel from the rack, and rubs it over his head and across his shoulders, before he goes back to his bedroom and grabs some fresh clothes, dropping the towel on top of his sweat-soaked sheets.

She appears in the doorway once he's dressed, her face a mask of sympathy. "It's not unnatural to feel this way," she tells him. "He ensured that you would."

"Don't tell me it's another game," Will replies sharply. "There's no one else. He's loyal to me."

"And where do your loyalties lie?"

Will rubs his hands over his face, through his damp hair, and sighs.

"It is important to remember that every killer has a reason for killing. Sometimes it makes sense only to them, but everyone has thought about killing someone, in one way or another. Whether it's an act of God, or their own hands, everyone has thought about it."

When Will turned eighteen, his father's life insurance policy had cashed out to his name. It was enough to pay for the first year and a half of tuition, books, and room and board at the University of Maryland. Will supplemented that income with scholarships, and by utilizing his insomnia to write other students' essays and do their homework for them for cash.

He was smart enough to get them the grades they wanted, without suspicion. The faculty never caught him because the subjects were so varied. Will wrote essays about literature, on Russian history, on Feminist movements in the late nineteenth century for a Sociology major. He did calculus and statistics assignments, proofread dissertations on the Marxist rhetoric, and helped his fellow Criminology majors on their supposition essays.

He did this because Shadow Man had told him to learn. Will learned. He learned a lot of things.

He also learned about the pack mentality at fraternities. He learned how people are so quick to overlook an Alpha's failings if they're good at sports – he also learned what it feels like to break someone's jaw with his knuckles and when he'd nursed his hand after, he'd thought of Chris and the Fireball whiskey and laughed.

He observed the differences in stress levels of students attending from out of state, versus those who went home at night and on the weekends; those that had younger siblings, or older siblings, or were the only children in their families. He watched how the psychology of teenagers change when introduced to the freedoms of alcohol and sex in liberal accessibility; those that had an Alpha-female parent pair, and Alpha-Omega, two women, single parent households.

He watched, and he learned, a sponge for any kind of knowledge he could gain. He studied the meanings of different kinds of flowers, read book after book of brainteasers and riddles,

dabbled in Graphoanalysis – the study of handwriting. His scholarships and thirst for knowledge gained him so much positive attention that, by the time his degree was done, he already had an interview and entry position at the FBI ready for him, whenever he wanted to take the test.

He remembers his uncle calling him when he'd refused. The Alpha had been confused, aggravated – the FBI was a good job, a Government salary and benefits that Will would be foolish to scoff at, especially in lieu of Will's pursuit of a career in the police force.

Will had only one answer for him; "I'll have more time to learn."

He wasn't ready, yet. And Will passed his psychological evaluation with flying colors, and laughed to himself at how easy it had been to appear normal to the one conducting the interview. Humble enough to be smart, sharp enough to be an asset. Will has spent so long being something else, who could blame him for wanting to return to the one person who has always known who and what he is?

"Psychopaths feel rage. They feel jealousy, and love."

The first time Will met Special Agent Jack Crawford, he'd been a guest lecturer in one of Will's classes during his junior year.

Jack paused when a student behind Will raised her hand, and Jack pointed to her, nodding in acceptance for her question. "I thought they can't feel emotions like we do," she said. Will huffed, shaking his head once, sharply.

He looked up to see Jack's eyes on him.

"That's what makes them psychopaths."

Jack smiled. "It's all chemicals," he told her, and then his eyes dropped to Will again. "They are created in our brains and register in what we might call a conscience. Through it all, our natures and how we were raised shape how we react to those chemicals. Show me a man who doesn't react to anything, and I will tell you he's not alive."

Will pressed his lips together, looking down at his notebook. The back of it had a sketch, a silhouette of a man with claws and horns and burning yellow eyes.

"I've never known a man who cannot be offended," Will muttered. Apparently, it was loud enough to catch Jack's attention, because he paused – Will hadn't even realized he was speaking again – and nodded to him. Will's shoulders tense, he ducked his head down. "It all comes down to pride."

"How do you figure?"

"An Alpha kills his wife's boyfriend. Pride, offense. A killer strangles young Omegas because he's proud of his dominance over them. They contact the press and taunt the police because they have something to prove."

Jack paused, regarding Will, and then he smiled. "Very good," he said, gruff but warm. "Please stay behind after the lecture, if you would."

Will ended up with a placement offered to him after graduation, once that seminar ended. It took him two hours to decide not to take it. But Jack caught him in the end. Jack is the kind of Alpha with the dogged determination to chase down any prey.

He imagines he was quite a feather in Jack's cap, the first time he profiled and caught a killer. It all comes down to pride.

"Daydreamer, I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Your only parent was an Omega, a single one, yet you refer to him as your father. Did you ever know your sire?"

"No. He left before I was born. I never knew him."

"Does that make you angry?"

Will remembers not really knowing how to respond to that question. At the age of sixteen, anger was a pretty dominant emotion, born of frustration at being the biggest fish in a very small pond. He would scoff at his own sense of pride, but it never came with confidence or ambition. It's a statement of fact.

"Should it?" he had written back.

"I imagine after losing both your parents that it's easy to feel abandoned. Alone."

"Do you feel alone, Shadow Man?"

"Sometimes, my darling, I'll admit I am lonely. Those thoughts often are accompanied by thoughts of you."

"There's a difference between being alone and being lonely." Will had taken up buying little wooden puzzles, solving them in his spare time. The kind where you have to get a ring out from a knotted rope and a ball too large to wrap the ring around, or where a series of interlocking puzzle pieces form a perfect square.

"You're right," Shadow Man had replied.

There hadn't been any letters for a while after that. Will had tried desperately not to let it worry him. Shadow Man promised he wouldn't leave, that they would be together after Will confronted him about it. A day turned into two, then three, then a week.

Then, impatient, Will had written again; "You wouldn't be lonely if we were together."

Another week passed before he got his answer.

"As much as I would delight in having you with me, my dear, I'm afraid I cannot accept your offer. I am making a place for you, and I need to make sure it's perfect before I come for you. Please be patient with me, and know that I am not the kind of man to give out my affection lightly."

"What does that mean?" Will had asked, but he knew the answer. He always understood the things Shadow Man was trying to say.

"It means that my love, my heart, is yours, and always will be. If you can be patient, I would have you by my side when the time is right."

"I will never want anything else."

Harrison and his friend, who Will finally learns is named Ed, come on Tuesday morning as they'd promised. They have a loading van and a crew of people and Will greets them with a nod. He's placed tarps over all the furniture in his house in preparation, and Harrison comes forward and shakes his hand.

"I'll get out of your way," Will tells him as the first of the crew start to unload the truck of roofing tiles, new insulation, and two large ladders to access the roof.

Harrison smiles. "The weather's been good to us, and the roof isn't big. We should be done with that today, and we can work on the siding and the water damage the rest of the week."

"Great," Will replies. He whistles shortly, calling Winston and Addy to his side, and heads to his car. They follow along behind him, tails wagging and nuzzling at Will's hands as he passes. "I'll be back this evening then. You have my number if you need anything."

Harrison nods, and Will opens the backseat of his car to let Winston and Addy inside.

He gets in the car and drives to the road, then turns towards town with a lack of anywhere else to go. He spied a park on his drive in – though he's not sure he could call it a park, more like an open field with a swing set and climbing frame in one corner – but it will do for the dogs. The drive takes him just under half an hour and he puts collars and leashes on Winston and Addy for appearances' sake. But they're good dogs, and he knows they won't run off.

He turns them loose in the field and then sits, his hands tucked into his pockets, in the grass with his back against a fence post. The sun is shining, the day is clear and idyllic, if a little

cold, and he's the only one in the park this early in the morning.

He watches Winston do his customary roll in the grass as Addy, always the protector, checks the perimeter for any interesting smells. He sighs, closes his eyes, and tilts his head back to sun his face.

"Why did I kill John?"

In Will's head, he conjures up a whiteboard. In one corner, his brain writes, in red: "John. 16. Mated Alpha. Brown hair, brown eyes. Physically fit, charismatic, someone everyone loved."

The bullet points form and soak into the whiteboard, leaving the rest of the space. In a second column, in black, Will creates another list.

"Flayed hands. Peeled face. Cut throat. Bitten neck. Torn back. Left naked in his home."

No signs of forced entry, so either he knew Shadow Man's face, or he'd used some kind of ruse to get inside. Will had been the one to find his body, but he hadn't been in the house at all that day. You'd think on such a momentous occasion, Will would remember every detail of that day with utter clarity, but he doesn't. It could have been the day he spent under the letterbox, with some of John's candy in his lap to sate his hunger, working on the crossword puzzle Shadow Man left him and harboring some hope that he might see the man while he was working. It might have been one of the days his dad took him fishing in the morning and he'd gone to the docks after to help in his work. Will can't honestly remember, and he's not sure if it should trouble him or not.

The cut in his neck had been clean and surgical. No hesitation, no fear. Shadow Man has killed before, or his conviction made his hand so steady that there had been no room for error in his actions. Of course, Will knows Shadow Man is deliberate and assured in everything he does. That kind of thing comes from practice and confidence.

Shadow Man had chosen John for a reason – either because of how personal it was to Will, or how impersonal it was to him. But Will is certain Shadow Man meant for Will to be the one to find the body, otherwise why would he leave it anywhere but the Alpha's home?

"If he meant for you to find it, that makes it personal."

Will smiles, and opens his eyes to see her sitting next to him. Her eyes are on the other side of the field, bright and blue, her scarf a pale white that matches the pallor of her skin. She looks faded today, and turns with a whip of her straight, dark hair, to meet his eyes.

"I feel like there's something I'm missing," Will says. In his mind's eye, she's standing next to him in front of the whiteboard, looking over what he's already written. Photographs of John's body have joined the lists, on the right-hand side in a macabre collage.

She nods, pressing her lips together. "There is."

"I don't want to disappoint him again," Will mutters. "I have to be sure."

"Didn't you say you needed the case file?"

Will frowns, sucking in a breath through his teeth. "Don't think it'll be easy," he huffs, rubbing a hand through his hair. "I don't have the credentials to subpoena for it, and there aren't going to be a lot of people looking too kindly on me digging up that old horror."

"I guess you have to ask yourself if being liked is more important than finding Shadow Man."

Will huffs. "You know the answer to that."

She smiles. "Then I guess you do, too."

Will nods, sighing, and then his attention is drawn at the sound of loud, excited barking. He turns to see a Husky mix barreling towards Addy, followed by the stumbling, off-kilter pursuant in the shape of a young boy. A woman is chasing the two of them, calling the dog's name, and Will smiles to himself.

Then, a shadow falls across him. "...Will? Will Graham?"

Will blinks, looking up, his eyes widening when he sees the face of the man standing over him. He blinks, and scrambles to his feet. He would recognize the Omega's bright eyes anywhere. He was a high schooler when Will was eight, which would put him in his forties. The woman's jaw matches his, she inherited her mother's blonde hair and blue eyes, Will is sure.

The Omega clears his throat. "I don't know if you remember me," he begins.

"I do," Will replies shakily. He presses his lips together and swallows at the look of surprise on the Omega's face. He's as pretty as Will remembers, his jaw sharp, delicate cheekbones pink with exertion. "I remember you. Not your name."

The Omega smiles, fond and motherly. He holds out his hand. "Elijah," he murmurs.

Of course. The name flickers in Will's memory, and he manages a small smile. "Elijah," he says, shaking his hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Elijah replies with a cavalier shrug. "I wasn't even sure it was you. Your hair is the same."

Will huffs, smiling down at his feet. Elijah is smaller than him, blessed with the dainty beauty of his breed. He smells sweet and gentle, like mown grass and coconut milk.

In the silence, he looks over at the woman and her son. If Elijah was pregnant when John died, his daughter would be in her late twenties, and the child looks to be around six or seven. Addy and the Husky mix have apparently made friends and Addy seems more than content to let the child pet and play with her. Winston has returned to the fence, sniffing at the place Will was sitting.

"You bought John's house," Elijah says after another moment.

Will nods, pressing his lips together.

"Why?" he asks.

Will shrugs one shoulder, running his hand through his hair. Elijah is exactly the kind of person he doesn't feel like he could justify himself to. He's too close to the tragedy that struck in that house, all those years ago. And Will can't talk about his job, or the Shadow Man, without giving away his true motivations.

Although... "I work for the FBI," Will says. Elijah blinks, tilting his head to one side. "I wanted to come back here and see if there was anything I could do about John's murder."

Elijah frowns, the gold flecks in his iris thickening with emotion. "See if you could do anything about it?" he parrots back.

Will nods. "The statute of limitations on murder never runs out," he replies. "It's not too late. John was my friend, and he meant a lot to the people of this town. I feel like I owe it to the people he cared about and the people who cared about him to find out who did it."

Elijah smiles, his eyes brightening. "Do you think you can?" he asks, whisper-quiet.

"I have to try," Will replies. He bites his lower lip, meeting Elijah's gentle eyes, and takes a step forward, putting his hand on Elijah's arm. "I believe I can."

"John liked you a lot," Elijah says. "He thought of you like a little brother."

Will smiles, and drops his hand.

"Mom!"

Elijah turns at the sound of the woman's voice, as she walks with her son holding one hand, her dog's collar in the other. The Husky is jumping up, tail wagging wildly, trying to jump on Addy as she trots along beside the other animal. Will smiles, whistling sharply, and Addy and Winston come to his side and sit down.

"Molly," Elijah greets warmly, taking the child's other hand as they come to a stop between Elijah and Will. "Will, this is Molly, my daughter. And her son, Wally."

"Pleased to meet you," Will replies politely. Elijah's sweet scent is starting to sting his nose, and Molly's scent is a perfect combination of coconut milk and wood bark. It's pleasant, and Will resists the urge to draw her scent in through his teeth to see how much of John lingers in her as well. She inherited John's nose, his broad shoulders, the thickness of his hair even though the color is all Elijah. She's a lovely young woman, and her smile is bright and happy.

"And you," she says, unwilling to forgo her hold on her dog and child, but she gives Will a nod that he returns. Then, she frowns. "Wait, Will?" she asks, looking to her father for clarification. "*That* Will?"

Elijah nods. "He works for the FBI."

Her eyes widen in surprise. "Oh," she says, swallowing.

Will clears his throat, sudden tension in the air sitting on the back of his neck. "John was good to me," he says.

"The police couldn't find who did it," she says, somewhat sharply. "What makes you think you can?"

Will smiles tightly, and shrugs one shoulder. It wouldn't be good to come across as arrogant. "I work in the Behavioral Science Unit," he replies. "I studied people like the man who killed your father. I'm not promising I'll find him, but I felt like I had to try."

She hums, pressing her lips together, and lifts her chin in challenge. "Well. Good luck."

Will smiles. "I should be going," he says, taking another step back. Winston and Addy follow him, huffing and tails wagging.

"It was good to see you again, Will," Elijah says brightly. "Molly and I live in town. If you ever need something, or want to get away from the house, our door is always open."

Will smiles tightly. "Thank you," he says, and clucks his tongue to his dogs, and turns to walk out of the park. He does his best not to look like he's fleeing, but he's not sure how well he succeeds.

Will can chalk it up to whatever he wants, but he knows the reality of the situation is that the final straw, the last thing that let him know he wasn't fit to continue in his line of work, wasn't that he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs. It wasn't that he couldn't save his daughter, and that her ghost follows him around in the recesses of his mind.

What triggered his decision was Jack.

"Therapy doesn't work on me."

"Therapy doesn't work because you won't let it."

Jack's eyes were red, all Alpha, willing to cow Will into submission if necessary. He might use his Voice, and if he did, Will would have stood up and walked out of that office and that building and that life without a second look back.

"And," Will said tightly, "because I know all the tricks."

"Well, perhaps you need to unlearn some tricks."

Unlearn? Shadow Man would never demand that of him.

Doctor Hannibal Lecter is a refined man. He is an Alpha. He's the first man Will has ever looked at with something other than outright defiance.

"Jack thinks I need therapy."

He sits, controlled and assured. Will is across from him, avoiding eye contact because meeting Doctor Lecter's eyes is too much like baring his throat. There's no notebook in his lap, everything Will might say is remembered and recorded like notes on a musical score.

"What you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there."

Will fights the urge to bare his teeth. "Last time he sent me to a dark place, I brought something back."

Doctor Lecter smiles – it's a small twitch of his lips, pleased and promising. Will remembers tightening his thighs and feeling his heart slam against the back of his ribs. He smells good, like crisp, sweet wine and old paper. He's close enough that Will could touch him. His fingers curl.

"It's not the ghost of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, is it? It's the knowledge that there exists a man so bad, that killing him felt good."

"I didn't feel good when I killed him," Will replies sharply. "I just felt."

"Instincts are powerful things, Will." He hesitates on Will's name, like he wants to call him something else. Will looks away, his eyes on the books on the second level of the study. His foot jogs up and down and he wishes more than anything that he had a rubber band around his wrist.

"You couldn't save Abigail Hobbs," he says. Will winces at her name. "So why this sprig of zest?"

Will growls, and meets Doctor Lecter's dark eyes. There's no red in them – he isn't the kind of Alpha to lose control over just anything. "Why do you call it zest?" he demands.

"You could have shot Garrett Jacob Hobbs," he replies. "But you didn't. You attacked him, killed him with your bare hands. Why?"

"I had to be sure."

"Certainty is something not a lot of people have the luxury of having," Doctor Lecter murmurs. Will doesn't like how close he's sitting, for the fact that it lets him see too much. He has his mind shut down, walls and forts and everything in between thrown up so that the man cannot read just how much Will liked killing Hobbs. Doctor Lecter smiles. "Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time, and are we not made in His image?"

"I don't believe in fairy tales, Doctor Lecter," Will says.

The other Alpha's smile widens, showing his teeth. It would be threatening on anyone else, but Will is not afraid. He has dealt with worse monsters than the one prowling in Doctor

Lecter's eyes. "God's terrific. He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshipers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn."

Will huffs. "Did God feel good about that?"

"He felt powerful," Doctor Lecter replies. "Just as you must have, when you felt the life leave Hobbs' body. But that power was robbed from you, when Abigail died in your arms."

"I'm not going to play your game, Doctor Lecter," Will snaps. "Clear me or don't."

The other Alpha's eyes flash, a challenge in them. Will lifts his chin, defiant. He wants to see what would happen if he decided to push. It all comes down to pride.

"Do you like to play games, Will?" he says, whisper-quiet, almost a purr. Will hates how his shoulders tense and the hair on the back of his neck stands up. He can't help feeling that he's felt Doctor Lecter's eyes on him before.

"I like a puzzle," he replies tightly.

Doctor Lecter's smile widens again. He flattens his hands out on the wide armrests of his chair and folds one leg over the other, the picture of casual control. He doesn't feel threatened by Will. Will isn't sure if he wants him to be.

"Jack gives you puzzles," he says.

"Jack gives me blood," Will growls back. "Do you think that's the same?"

He receives another smile for his question. "Tell me, Will," he says, "did you always want to be a detective?"

"I can't remember a time that I didn't."

"Why is that?"

"No one asks a child why they want to be an astronaut, or a firefighter."

"Lofty ambitions," Doctor Lecter replies. "But yours are Earth-bound, covered in viscera and blood."

"That church roof," Will says. "I remember reading the story. There was a structural flaw in the ceiling, a loose screw, a rotten beam. Someone didn't do their job, and people died as a result. If God did that, then He was the one who made the mistake in the first place. Why do you think that is?"

"Why do you?" Doctor Lecter returns.

Will's eyes flash, and he sighs, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "If I were God," he says, "and I had created Man, with all its bruised and broken edges, and given them free will, there are a lot of things I think I would do."

"Are you profiling God?" Doctor Lecter asks, amused and warm.

Will swallows. "He's the ultimate serial killer," he says.

Doctor Lecter laughs. It's a rich, lovely sound. Will's thighs tense.

"It's all about pride, Doctor Lecter," Will murmurs. "And free will. I think, if I were God, I would look at Man the same way a child pours water into an ant hill. The same way people try and build bigger bombs, faster-loading guns, more dangerous rollercoasters."

"And why is that?"

"To see what would happen."

Doctor Lecter pauses, and then he smiles. Warmly, widely. Will feels a flush run into his gut that has nothing to do with the warmth in his office.

"Good, Will," he purrs, and the heat grows claws, tears into his spine. "Very good indeed."

Will turned in his resignation that day. He didn't like the fact that, if anyone could find out the truth and turn his love away from Shadow Man, it would have been Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

"Shadow Man, do you have a family?"

"Why do you ask, my daydreamer?"

"I don't like the thought of you being alone."

"That's sweet, my dear, but you needn't worry about me. In answer to your question – I did have a sister, and parents like any other. I lost them a long time ago, just after I presented."

"I'm sorry. I can't imagine a loss like that."

"Can't you? You've lost both of your parents."

"My father's death brought you back to me. I don't see it as a loss."

"You flatter me, darling. It is true we all must suffer in this life, but I would have wished you all the health and happiness in the world if I were able."

"You make me happy."

"And for that, I am extremely glad."

Will returns to his home to find the door locked, the key left in the mailbox, along with a manila folder. He frowns, taking it out. On the edge is written the name; "Martin, John."

John's case file.

"You didn't request it yet," she says, frowning as he walks into the house. He shakes his head, letting the dogs in, and closes the door behind him. He pulls the tarp back from his dining room table and leaves the folder there, before he goes to the fridge and takes out the box of chocolate that Shadow Man left him.

He doesn't touch the wine. He will save it for when they finally meet.

He brings the chocolate back to the table, wraps a rubber band around his wrist, conjures up the whiteboard in his mind, and, with a deep breath, opens the file.

The pictures of John's broken and mutilated body slam back into his head, sharper now, losing the brown-edge to the faded memories. His fingers tremble as he touches the stretch of John's cracked jaw, his bared fangs. He runs his gaze over his bruised and flayed hands, his ripped back, the ugly-looking bite mark at his throat.

He pictures Shadow Man touching him like that, and he shivers.

"Cause of death: exsanguination," he murmurs. John bled out, essentially, from the multitude of wounds but mostly from his throat being slit. None of the harm had been done post-mortem.

That kind of attack is supposed to leave *something* behind. Shadow Man would have been covered in blood. That kind of thing draws notice. But no one saw anything, and there was no DNA left behind, no fabric or fibers, no hair or skin. He must have worn some kind of suit to cover it up.

Will frowns at the whiteboard in his head. "I'm missing something," he whispers.

She stands next to him, and turns to him with a smile. "Look closer."

"Why did I kill John?"

Why does anyone do anything? Pride? What possible offense could John have caused?

Will sucks in a breath, and turns the page to a pointed list of injuries.

He blinks, his eyes widening.

He took John's kidney.

A flash of recognition stirs in his head – the body of the last victim of Garrett Jacob Hobbs, mounted on a stag's head. But Hobbs didn't kill her. Will knows that. The petulance of the crime scene was nothing like Hobbs' M.O. There was no honor with how that girl was treated.

But he took her kidney.

"Oh my God," he says. At the bottom of the second list, "Missing kidney" forms in slanted, shaky letters. She frowns, looking at it, and crosses her arms over her chest.

"What does that mean?"

"It means whoever killed that girl, the copycat, killed John too."

He blinks, the pendulum of gold swinging across his vision. He thinks of the precision of the cut on John's neck. A bite mark not to represent a territorial fight or a mating bite gone wrong, but to lead the police in the wrong direction. Claws in his back, not because of anger, or the desire to do harm, but to make it look like there had been a fight.

There was no fight. Shadow Man slaughtered John the same way he slaughtered that girl; like a *pig*.

He sits forward, his hands shaking. Shadow Man had followed him to Minnesota, and showed him that gift-wrapped crime scene that had been the final nail in the coffin of Hobb's profile. Through Shadow Man's present, Will had been able to find and kill Hobbs.

"I can't wait to see what kind of man you will become."

He'd been there. He'd been *there*. Will might have seen him, spoken to him. His heart slams against the back of his chest and his eyes start to water.

"All this time," he whispers. "You've been watching me all this time."

"But why kill John?" she asks, frowning at the whiteboard.

The answer appears to Will like another letter, written in Shadow Man's beautiful, dark script.

"He kills the way God kills," he says.

She tilts her head to one side, and Will grabs a sheet of paper and a pen, and shoves himself to his feet.

"I know why you did it. I know why you've always done it. Come to me, tonight. I need to feel you. I need to know what your hands feel like on me. I will leave the answer on my door, and if I'm right, you are free to enter my house. I'll keep my eyes closed.

Please."

He sprints to the letterbox, his piece of paper clutched tightly in his hand. He opens the box and shoves his answer inside, breathing out heavily when the lid closes. She is next to him, impatience on her face and in the set of her mouth.

"Why did he kill John?"

Will smiles.

He takes another piece of paper, writes down his answer, folds it in three, and tapes it to the door.

"You did it because you wanted to see what would happen."

He goes back to the table, and eats the last chocolate in the box. It has an almond nougat in the center, and Will knows better than to ask why Shadow Man knows he doesn't have any allergies. The nutty flavor is sweet and welcome on his tongue, and he takes out the wine, opens it and leaves it in a decanter with a glass on the table.

He lets his dogs go outside, and then pulls their beds into the kitchen and closes the door. There's a dog door in the back so he knows they'll be able to go outside if they need to.

Then, he goes upstairs. He flips his mattress, puts a new set of sheets on it, and dresses for bed. The last thing he does before he lays down is take out an old t-shirt, and he sinks his fangs into the bottom of the garment, tearing it so that a long strip of cloth comes away.

He wraps it around his eyes, tying it tightly at the back of his head, and settles down to wait. She doesn't stay with him.

Will wakes when the door opens. He can feel eyes on him, and his shoulders tense, but he doesn't reach up to remove the blindfold around his eyes. He knows the light from the moon is coming in through his open curtains, and Shadow Man will be able to see that his vision is obscured, protecting them both.

A single footstep sounds out, crossing the threshold into Will's bedroom, and then he hears another rustle of clothes, the sound of fabric falling to the floor. Another step, and Will's breathing is unsteady, his heart hammering with anticipation.

A gentle touch, the knuckles of two fingers, ghosts along his cheek, and he whimpers.

"Shh," Shadow Man says, and the mattress dips with his weight. Will wants to reach out to him – he's not afraid, not even a little, but he's sick with anticipation, with joy. He's sure his scent is thick with just how happy he is that Shadow Man is here with him.

The touch comes again, this time a hand against his jaw. Will swallows harshly as Shadow Man's palm drags down his neck, rests on the tender hollow of his throat.

Shadow Man leans down, close enough that Will can feel his exhale on his cheeks. He lets out a soft growl, and his voice is low and rough, *Alpha*. Will can barely hear it over the blood rushing in his ears. His lips part and Shadow Man touches his thumb to the corner of Will's

mouth, cupping his face, and Will rolls onto his back, blinking behind the blindfold like he might be able to will his vision to pierce through it.

Shadow Man gently coaxes his head to one side and Will bares his throat, submissive and trusting. His breath catches when he feels teeth at his neck, before they're sheathed, and Shadow Man presses a gentle kiss to Will's racing pulse.

Will's hands find his wrists, curling around them. They feel strong, everything about him feels so composed and elegant. His fingers aren't callused like Will's are – whatever he does for a living, it requires his hands to be steady and sure, but not tortured.

"So," Will breathes, "I was right."

In answer, he receives a soft purr. It's the most beautiful thing he's ever heard.

"You've always been there," Will says. He wants to *see*, but he promised he wouldn't. He needs, desperately, to hear the man's voice. "You helped me find Hobbs. You killed John, so that I would be able to catch other killers. So that I would want to."

"Yes," Shadow Man replies, his voice too much of a whisper for Will to distinguish accent or age. Shadow Man has to be older than him, but if the strength Will feels in his arms is any indication, he's still in prime physical health. He'd have to be.

The hand leaves his throat, Shadow Man's touch turns reverent and soft on his cheeks, thumbs brushing with utmost gentleness across his eyelids, over the blindfold. Will bites his lower lip, turns his body close to Shadow Man's heat. His hand finds Shadow Man's hip, slides down and flattens over his thigh.

"I'm not afraid," Will says.

The declaration obviously pleases Shadow Man, because he starts to purr. It's a soothing, beautiful sound, and Will gasps when he hears it. He wants to place his ear to the source, hear it rumbling in Shadow Man's chest so that it shakes his whole body.

Shadow Man's hands slide back into his hair, tightening at the nape of his neck, and Will trembles, biting his lower lip again hard enough to make it sting. His hand tightens on Shadow Man's thigh. "Say something," he begs.

Shadow Man's purr gets louder, and the air moves, shifting and warm, and Will gasps when he feels Shadow Man's nose brush against his own, a brief nuzzle, before their lips meet. His mouth is soft, and Will kisses the stubble above his upper lip when Shadow Man parts his jaws, catches Will's lower lip in his teeth, bites down.

The sting of pain sends a shockwave down Will's spine, and he trembles, tensing up. Shadow Man lifts his head and Will chases him, letting go of his thigh and reaching blindly, finds soft hair between his fingers, and pulls Shadow Man's mouth to his again. His other arm falls back, elbow braced on the mattress to keep him upright, so he can hold the kiss.

Shadow Man's purr changes to a low rumble, a promising growl stuck in his throat. He lets go of Will with one hand, flattens it on Will's bared neck. Will understands things like touch starvation and oversensitivity, but the way Shadow Man touches him – so casually, so controlled – lights up parts of Will that have never been touched at all. As a result, he's shaking, his stomach burning and his spine sitting like shards of lightning that lights up the backs of his eyes.

They part again, and Will is somewhat gratified to hear Shadow Man growl, like he is just as offended and desperate as Will feels, betrayed by their lungs and their bodies' need for air. Will doesn't let himself fall – he tightens his hand in Shadow Man's hair and breathes in deeply. He catches the scent of cologne, something musky that's hiding his true scent.

He lets out a whine of frustration, and Shadow Man purrs to him again, cupping Will's face with both hands, and kisses his forehead.

"Sleep," he says, still so whisper-quiet.

"Don't leave," Will says, but he's already standing, and Will sits up, but he doesn't touch the blindfold until he hears the door close and footsteps going back down the hallway, down the stairs. He tears off the blindfold, so tempted to give chase like any Alpha with their mate, but he mustn't. Shadow Man would never forgive him for ruining their game.

There are *rules*.

He turns on the light in the room instead, and looks to see that Shadow Man left a piece of clothing behind at the corner of Will's bed. He runs to it, falling to his knees, and takes it in both hands, lifting it to his nose and breathing in deeply. Still that same cologne, covering up his real scent. It's one of Will's own shirts, though. One of the ones he would wear to his lectures or to a crime scene.

He swallows when he realizes this is the same one he was wearing when they found the copycat's victim – the girl on the stag's head. Will had left it behind in his old house, not wanting the reminder to follow him when he already had her.

He was *there*.

Will sucks in a shaky breath, clutching the shirt to his chest, and crawls back into bed with the lights still on. His lips feel tender and sore, burning from Shadow Man's kiss. His stomach is full of butterflies, his heart doesn't feel like it will slow any time soon.

He would have let Shadow Man touch him more – he aches for it, with a desperation like hunger or thirst. He would have let Shadow Man bare his body, bite his neck, pierce that one place no one else has touched. He would have let him do all of it.

But that kiss was intimate. Will doesn't believe in things like soulmates, but if there ever were such a thing, Will is sure their touch would be much like this; a brand, a flail, skinning their mates alive so that there is nothing but flesh and blood between them.

She appears in the room, melting from a shadow, and sits beside him on the bed without a word.

"He was there," Will tells her. "At the crime scene. He saw me."

"Why didn't he speak?" she replies.

Will blinks, and then he swallows. His fingers tighten in the shirt. He feels the truth in the words before he can give them voice; "Because he knew I'd recognize him."

That next morning, the wine is half-finished, and there's a letter in an envelope propped up against the empty glass. It's addressed to 'Daydreamer'.

Will sits down, brings the glass to his mouth, and rests the edge against his lips. They haven't stopped burning since last night. He sighs, and pours himself the rest of the wine, killing the decanter.

He opens the envelope.

"My daydreamer,

You cannot imagine my joy upon receiving your last message. I knew you alone would be able to figure out my puzzle. Still, that satisfaction is impossible to compare to how it felt to finally touch you, to hold you in my arms and taste your mouth. You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and it took all of my control not to accept the offer of your neck and body, which I know you were so willing to give me.

You must understand; although I wanted to, I couldn't have. Laying with you while I am still a stranger would have been wrong. I'm not that kind of monster, my darling, and I hope that you can forgive me for succumbing as much as I did.

The last time I saw you, you were a light starved of air, a fire consumed down to mere embers. I want to see you burn brightly again. Not just for me, but for yourself as well. I believe that this is possible, even as deep in the darkness as you are.

I will not come to you again. I must be strong for both of us, my beautiful, darling boy. So comes the second part of the puzzle:

Who am I?"

Will swallows, setting the letter down. He takes a drink of wine, finds it rich and thick in his throat.

"You know what he is," she says, sitting across from him on the tarp-covered chair.

Will nods, and smiles. "He said he needed to make a harder game for me," he replies. "This is the hardest one yet. And he's spent years doing it. Since I was eight."

She frowns.

"He's the Chesapeake Ripper," Will says, laughing to himself at the redundancy of explaining his thoughts to his own subconscious. "The killer no one can catch. My part in it started with John, and he kept killing, so that when the time came, I could profile him, and find him."

"He wants to be caught?" she asks.

"He wants to be seen," Will replies, and laughs again. He tips back the wine glass and empties it. "Like I said," he adds, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth. "It all comes down to pride."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Sorry! This is actually going to be four parts but I think you'll be very happy with where it's going :D

Harrison and his crew come back the next day to start knocking down the wall and working on the water damage in the master bedroom. Will lets the dogs out while they work, not wanting to risk them getting underfoot or inhaling anything that might damage them. He takes the empty and washed crumble dish from beside his fridge, knowing that he should do the neighborly thing and return it before it's been gone too long.

The thought of confronting Deborah and Malcom's plastic smiles is unsettling.

She's sitting in the passenger seat when he gets into his car and starts it, pulling away from the house. "He's been watching you all this time," she says quietly. Will nods, unable to stop the flicker of warmth that curls around his heart at the thought. He's sure there has never been, in the history of humanity, someone who has loved and cared for another person so much. "From Maryland, to Louisiana, Virginia, and back again. Means he had transportation and means to follow you and watch you, no matter where you went."

Will nods. "And money," he replies. Shadow Man has to be rich, to afford such expensive gifts and whatever he had to do to live and watch as he wanted. Will wonders just how closely he watched; if he was ever in the stands when Will played soccer for that brief stint of time that he tried to be athletic, emulating Chris. He wonders if Shadow Man was there when Will received a commendation for his aptitude in his creative writing classes. If he was there at Will's high school graduation, a silent watcher at the back of the crowd.

He tries to recall how it felt to have Shadow Man's eyes on him, if he'd ever felt them before, but he can't. It feels like he should remember – every time the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, every time a flutter of unexplained excitement rattled his lungs. Every time a rumble of pleasure echoed on the wind, or someone clapped just a little louder than all the rest.

No familiar faces come to mind. Will hadn't learned to see, back then. He hadn't been ready.

His fingers tighten on the steering wheel, thinking back to all the years he's wasted. If he had started a little sooner, tried a little harder, perhaps Shadow Man would have come to him when he was younger, when he wasn't a dead ember but a roaring fire. The kind of passion that ignites stone-cold forges – that is what Shadow Man conjures in him. Will isn't an Omega, there's no time period of beauty and fertility that he needs to worry about passing, but his formative years have been spent with his closest friend and the great love of his life as

a stranger, and it feels like the most unforgivable betrayal to have forced Shadow Man to the sidelines in pursuit of other ventures.

He thinks of Alana, how he could have easily gotten his shit together and pursued her as a mate, and his stomach turns.

She smiles next to him. "You wouldn't have made her happy," she says.

Will sighs. "I know," he replies. "But I love her, all the same."

"I think he'll understand," she says.

"He does," Will replies. "Otherwise she wouldn't still be alive."

When Will went to college, he felt a liberation unlike any other, because he no longer had to worry about hiding the letters from his uncle. The allure for out of state college wasn't in the freedom, wasn't in the sex or drugs or alcohol he could readily partake in if he so chose, but in the fact that the letters to Shadow Man were much easier to give and receive. Will had single housing, which he understands was rare, but he could afford it and with his scholarships and the promising statistic he presented for the university, he knew he had been blessed with the chance for solitude.

Of course, looking back on it now, he wonders if that was another way in which Shadow Man flexed his influence, to give Will the privacy and isolation that not only benefited him, but suited Will best.

Will has never been good at making friends. Even when he tried, he found that the friendships he forged were more an exchange and an agreement for mutual benefit. People he did assignments for greeted him in public, but they never invited him to parties. The people who invited him to parties tended to only do so because he was there when they were talking about it, or because one of them wanted a sexual relationship with him.

Will never indulged. His fantasies and his own hand were the only things he allowed himself to try. His mind and his neck and his body were only for one person to touch – he knew it back then and he knows it now. He wonders, if he ever had tried to get a boyfriend or girlfriend, if they would have ended up as another statistic, another picture and autopsy report tied to the Ripper.

She presses her lips together, humming in thought. "I know how you made the leap to the Ripper," she says, because she's a product of Will's imagination, so of course she knows everything he knows. "But are you sure?"

"He takes organs," Will says. "They're his trophies."

"What does he do with them?"

Will shrugs one shoulder.

"Doesn't it matter to you? Doesn't it trouble you?"

He sighs, and shakes his head. "I can't imagine there is any world where he and I aren't meant to be," he replies. He feels her eyes on his face and shrugs again, helplessly. "He made me into what I am," he says plainly. No bitterness there. How can one feel bitter towards someone that loves them so much? "He made sure I had all the tools to find him again, once we were both ready. He says we're ready now. I don't care how it happens, I don't care what I have to do. I have to meet him."

"He could hurt you," she says quietly, reaching out to touch his arm. "He could kill you."

"He could have hurt me last night," Will replies calmly. He turns his hand and catches her fingers, running his thumb along her cool knuckles once. She sighs and squeezes his hand. "He didn't, though."

She smiles. "He didn't do a lot of things, last night."

Will presses his lips together. He remembers the feeling of Shadow Man's kiss, his hands in Will's hair, the soft rumble of his growl. It had lit him up like nothing else had – no high, no amount of alcohol, no orgasm by his own hand had ever felt close to that good. He's not sure he's strong enough to survive more but he'll be damned if he doesn't try.

"Daydreamer, there is something I'd like to ask you. It's a selfish question, but I hope you will do me the honor of answering honestly."

"Anything."

"Has there been anyone that's caught your eye?"

"What do you mean?"

"As much as I delight in you playing coy, my darling, now is not the time for humility. You're a beautiful young Alpha. I'm sure you've garnered more than your fair share of attention."

"I suppose. But that kind of thing doesn't interest me."

"Sex doesn't interest you?"

"Not with anyone here."

It had been an honest answer. Truthfully Will had no time for such things, even if the desire should strike him. When he wasn't doing his own work, or at the library soaking in knowledge of any subject that struck his fancy, he was doing assignments for other people, and catching sparse amounts of sleep in between. A relationship was not only not ideal, but downright impossible for him, especially as finals started to creep closer and Will's eyes, when they were open, would blur so badly that he could hardly study.

"Have you ever mated, Shadow Man?"

"No, darling, I have not."

"Then is it so hard to believe that I have no desire to, as well?"

"The world has changed since I was your age, my daydreamer." Will remembers frowning down at that particular letter, wondering not for the first time just how much older Shadow Man was to him. He couldn't have been that much older, he's sure, but Will knew he was at least several years his senior – older than John had been at the time of his murder, at least. "There are a lot more distractions."

"I've learned to compartmentalize," Will had written in reply, stuffing the letter into the generic mailbox for his dorm. He didn't know how the post office handled his letters, but they always came with a reply, so he never tried to look too closely.

"You must understand, darling; I would not begrudge you seeking whatever release you felt was necessary. Your health and happiness are paramount to me."

"No."

That was all Will wrote, that final time. He'd been too angry, too frustrated, too Goddamn *tired* to wax poetic. If Shadow Man didn't understand how much Will loved him, and needed him, and waited up every night for a letter to come to his mailbox, then he never would. But Will never strayed, even when alcohol was thick in his blood and the idea of seeking any warm body for the night was a terrible temptation, he never did.

The closest he ever got was during rush week his senior year, when a red-cheeked and sweet-smelling Omega had cornered him in the kitchen of a fraternity house, pressed up close and whispered how good Will smelled into his neck and palmed drunkenly at his cock through his jeans. Will has never gone red before, but he came pretty damn close to it that night.

He doesn't remember a lot about it, but he spent the darkest hours of that night on the football field, alone with his thoughts and a bottle of Fireball. That's where Alana ended up finding him, and Will had thrown up under the bleachers and whimpered pathetically as she stroked his hair and told him he needed to get some water in his system before he passed out for the night.

Will hadn't told her about Shadow Man, that night, but he still dreams about what might have happened if the Alpha had found him first. If Will would be happily mated with a scar on his neck and would know the feeling of a knot between his jaws, , teeth at his jugular, an Alpha's cock rutting against his own, burning hands raking down his back. If Shadow Man would

have taken him right then, in the middle of the open field and to Hell with anyone who might be watching.

The next morning, the Omega had found him in the library and apologized for his actions. He works in a grocery store now, where Will would go to pick up ready-made meals on days when he was too tired or too distracted to cook for himself during his career in Baltimore, and he still can't look Will in the eye without blushing.

The next house over is as different to his own as night is to day. There are garden gnomes in the front lawn, a wreath on the door with a "Joy and Light Within!" sign hanging below it, behind the screen. The windowpanes are ringed in bright blue, there's a birdfeeder and wind chimes hanging around the porch, and rocking chairs that look well-worn and weathered sitting out front.

Will swallows, makes an uncomfortable sound, and gets out of the car, baking dish in hand. He goes to the front door, opens the screen, and raps his knuckles on the sun-yellow door. He sees a car by the side of the house, so he knows somebody's home.

The door opens after a moment, revealing Deborah in a flour-covered smock, pink plaid, and jeans. Her eyes brighten when she sees him. "Oh, Will!" she declares brightly, and steps back to invite him inside. Will ducks his head and goes, feeling like he's too dirty for the shining hardwood floors and the brightly-lit, off-white walls. "What a nice surprise!"

"I, ah, wanted to bring this back," Will says. The air smells of bread and cookies and Will wonders just how Goddamn *stereotypical* someone can be in a town like this. Does every small town have a woman with so many smiling pictures of family and friends, where the air smells of home and everything looks like it's literally coated with love and joy? It makes his skin crawl.

"Well, thank you very much," she replies with a warm smile, taking it from him. She turns and walks back towards the kitchen and Will follows, knowing he hasn't been dismissed. "I hope you've been settling in well. We missed you at the social on Monday."

Will swallows, and resists the urge to point out that he explicitly said he wouldn't be there. "I'm sure it was a lot of fun," he replies politely. Behind him, her shadow creeps in through the door, her eyes on the pictures on the walls and fingers lightly touching the waist-high strip of yellow along the stairs. "I'll try my best to make the next one."

"I'll have to insist," Deborah says. She sets the dish down on the counter, next to a large bowl with what looks like cake batter inside, and turns to give him a playful wink. "I know where you live!"

Will manages a tight smile, sighing through his nose. He looks around again when she falls silent, apparently content to let him stew. "You have a lovely home," he says.

"Decorated it myself," Deborah says, with the kind of air people use when they really hired someone to do all the legwork, and stood and pointed and gave commands in lieu of actually doing any of the decorating themselves. "I'll have to help you when your house is ready. The poor thing is in desperate need of some T.L.C."

Will nods, agreeing absently. She turns and fixes him with a stern look; the kind a mother has when her child is about to beg her for a favor after being given a compliment. "I heard you've been talking to Elijah," she says, and Will blinks. Word travels far too quickly in this town.

"I met him, yes," Will replies. "And his daughter, and grandson."

"Ah, yes, a delightful family," Deborah says. Her eyes betray a thin veil of judgement, the kind people get when reminded of things like premarital or pre-mating sex and children born out of wedlock, but too kind to dismiss a family outright based on 'poor decisions'. "He was such a gentle boy. I'm so happy he managed to find some brightness after that whole...ugly business."

Will nods, thinking to John's case file, sitting in the backseat of his car. "I'll have to thank him for his help," he says, and she raises an eyebrow. "I told him I was looking into John's murder and he brought the case file by my house."

She blinks at him, and cocks her head to one side. "Did he now?" she says quietly.

Will frowns at her. "I assumed it was him," he replies.

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure of that," she says with a shrug, turning her attention back to the cake batter. Will can't imagine why she's making cookies, bread, and cake all at once. There's probably a bake sale or potluck going on that Will doesn't know about or care about. "He has barely spoken a word about that boy since it happened. I don't imagine he would be too interested in digging up that old pain."

Will frowns. "He's the only one I told about looking into it," he says.

Then again, word travels fast in this town. Maybe Molly recovered it and gave it to Will. Will can't imagine there are a lot of people who don't know where he lives at this point.

He presses his lips together and rubs his hand over the back of his neck, averting his eyes again. He catches a glimpse of her in the living room adjacent, sitting and staring at the fireplace. "Anyway," Will begins. "I should go. Thank you again for the crumble. It was delicious."

"Anytime!" Deborah replies, and Will nods, heading back out to the front door.

He pauses on the threshold. "Deborah?" he asks, and receives a hum in answer. "I don't suppose you have a lawnmower I could borrow?"

"Out back," Deborah calls, and Will nods. He leaves the house and she follows him, and he circles the house to the back, spying the lawnmower next to a tall stack of split firewood. It's under a tarp, and he takes it by the handle, dragging it towards his car. By the time he

manages to flatten the backseats and lift the machine into his trunk, his shoulder is screaming at him and he feels exhausted, but determined to get out of this Stepfordian liminal space as quickly as possible.

He drives back to his house and unloads the lawnmower, smiling as Winston and Addy barrel up to him, sniffing at it curiously. He wheels it to the back of the house, knowing his shoulder is in no condition to try and mow his lawn right now.

He plops down in the grass, petting over Winston's fur as the brindle dog curls up next to him, yawning widely before settling down, content to be in the sun by Will's side. Will sighs, curling his toes and wincing at the sting of the nettles against the backs of his laces. He should try and find some dock leaves, or aloe, for the sting, but that requires getting up and going back into town, or the forest, and he doesn't have that kind of energy right now.

Inside, he can hear drills, sledgehammers, men calling to each other. He wonders if they can smell that there was another Alpha in Will's home last night. If they recognize Shadow Man's scent in the same way Will doesn't.

"Shadow Man, will you tell me something about yourself?"

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to know?"

"I don't know. Anything. Everything."

Will had gone back to his uncle's house every summer, delighted when, during his summer between junior and senior year, Chris had come home too, finding some off time between football seasons to visit. His uncle had taken them out to the river to fish and grill what they caught. Will had always been a better fisherman than his relatives, patient and calm enough to catch just about anything he set his mind to. Chris usually just came along to drink and reminisce.

Will had been afraid that Shadow Man wouldn't write to him while he was out of state, but the letters always came without fail. He always knew where to find Will.

"There are so many things I'd like to share with you. Right now, I have been spending a lot of my time composing a new score."

"What instrument do you play?"

"A fair few. This is for the harpsichord. I'm having trouble coming up with an ending, though."

"What is it about?"

"It's about you, my dear. One day, I hope to play it for you."

"I'd like to hear it."

"You will, my daydreamer, one day. I promise."

"I can't wait."

"Alright, spill."

Will looked up from his books, blinking in surprise when Alana sat in front of him, two coffees in her hand. She held one out to Will like a bribe, and he took it, taking a sniff. It was black, overly-bitter just how he liked it. She always gave him grief about his choices of food and coffee but still brought him what he liked without fail.

"Spill what?" he asked.

Alana rolled her eyes. She had always been beautiful, but today she seemed positively radiant. Will chalked it up to the fact that her dissertation had been accepted. She had spent hours praising her advisor, so much so that Will could happily never hear the words 'Abnormal Omega psychology' and be perfectly content.

"I know there's someone," she said. Will winced, looking down, his stomach turning as he set the coffee to one side. "Come on, Will! You've never dated, you never even blink at any woman or Omega that crosses your path. I want to know."

"It's nothing," Will replied. "I just don't...look at people that way."

It was like comparing a swamp to a glittering ocean. Will had never looked at anyone and felt the same flutter of hopeless longing as he did when his eyes caressed Shadow Man's letters.

She cocked her head to one side, and then leaned in close. "Is it someone I shouldn't know about?" she asked. "A professor?"

Will blanched. "What? No."

"Someone back home, then?"

He shook his head. "Leave it alone, Alana," he said tightly.

She huffed. "At least tell me if it's a boy or a girl," she said.

Will shook his head again, keeping his eyes fixed doggedly on the papers in front of him. "I'm not telling you anything," he said.

"You know, Will, this level of repression isn't healthy."

"I'm not repressed," Will replied with a growl, baring his teeth at her. "I just don't think my private life is anyone's business."

"I'm your friend," Alana said, gently, but with an edge to it. Will flinched, swallowing back the sharpness of her disappointment on the roof of his mouth.

"And as my friend, I'm asking you to leave it alone."

She sighed, crestfallen that her interrogation hadn't gone as she'd planned. She took the lid off her coffee, blowing on it absently, sending the wafting scent of chai and sugar Will's way. His nose wrinkled at the smell – she always had a sweet tooth to rival any Omega Will had met. "Well, if there isn't anyone..." she began, and Will's shoulders tensed, "then you have no reason to refuse me."

Will looked up, frowning.

"I want you to meet someone," she said, smiling. "His name is Adam. He's *adorable*, a Sociology major, Omega, likes dogs..."

"Alana," Will growled, warning; "No."

"Come on!" she said, huffing in playful aggravation. "If there's no one else -."

"I'm asking you once, *now*, to leave this alone," Will snapped. "I have no interest in going on blind dates, or *any* dates, for that matter. I don't want to meet Omegas, or women, or anyone else. I just want to get through this Goddamn final because I feel like my head is bleeding and if I fail this course I'm going to have to retake it and I don't have the money to do that, and I need at least an A to keep my scholarship, so I'm asking you to *stop*."

Even though women don't react to an Alpha's Voice, Will wishes he had had one in that moment, if only to really get his point across. She would be able to hear if, even if it wouldn't affect her.

She regarded him for a long, long moment. Either shocked at his outburst, or upset that she had riled him up so badly. Finally, she sighed, and nodded. "Alright," she said. "No dates. I promise."

"Thank you," Will breathed, relieved beyond words.

"I just worry about you, Will," she said, finally, after another moment of silence where Will had fallen into the trap of thinking that the conversation was over. "We're pack animals. It's important to have a well-rounded social group, and I think having someone to come home to every night would make you happy."

"No offense, but you don't know what would make me happy," Will said. He regrets being so harsh with her, now, even though at the time it had felt like the most important thing in the world to drive his point home.

She pressed her lips together, and stood. "You're right," she said. "I'm just your best friend and getting a Doctorate in psychology. What do I know?"

She didn't speak to him for almost a week after that. Friends fight, Will knew that, but her absence stung him sharply. If there was any woman that could have made him happy, Will knows it would have been her. But he learned to accept this fact a long time ago; there was no room in his heart for anyone else. It had been consumed, utterly and in its entirety, by Shadow Man.

He had never stood a chance of being a normal, mated Alpha. Even if he had found another gay Alpha, who was sweet and kind and primal in the way he desperately craved, they wouldn't have compared to Shadow Man's beautiful words and the interactions through his letters that Will's soul leapt for every time he received a new one. He couldn't imagine coming home to anyone with so much joy and anticipation as that.

Will stirs, licking his lips to wet his dry mouth as he opens his eyes. He's still in his backyard, and the sun is setting. Winston and Addy are curled up beside him and she sits across from him, absently pulling at ghost strands of grass by his feet.

He sighs, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Mister Graham?"

It's Harrison. "Yeah?" Will calls, as the other Alpha rounds the back of his house. Winston looks up, tail wagging, and gives a soft woof of greeting.

Harrison pulls the ballcap off his head, wiping sweat from his brow. "We got most of the wall cleared out, and the drywall in the master bedroom should be done by tomorrow. All in all, I'd say we'll be out of your hair by the end of the week."

Will smiles, and nods. "Good," he replies. It will be good for him to start moving in for real.

"See you tomorrow," Harrison says, and leaves the way he'd come. Will listens to his crew loading up their trucks and driving away, and then he sighs.

She meets his eyes. "When did you eat last?" she asks.

Will shrugs. "I think the wine," he replies.

She huffs. "You should eat."

"I will," he says.

She looks at him for a long, long moment. "Something's on your mind."

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "Of the known cases in Maryland, the Ripper did his first victims in nine days," he says. She tilts her head to one side. "Annapolis, Essex, and Baltimore. He didn't kill again for eighteen months. Then there was another sounder of three in as many days. All in Baltimore."

She nods. "I know."

"Eleven months after the sixth victim there was a seventh. Two days later, the eighth was killed in his workshop. Every tool on the pegboard where they hung was used against him. As with the previous murders, organs were removed."

He recalls these murders like slides on a PowerPoint. The killer no one can catch. Now that he knows it was Shadow Man, he cannot help looking at these kills with something like affection. Each murder, another puzzle piece that will lead Will to the final display.

"What's your point?"

Will smiles. "He always takes an organ. Like the girl in Minnesota. Like with John. The removal of organs and abdominal mutilations means that the Ripper is someone with anatomical or surgical knowhow. There is a...distinctive brutality."

The kind of brutality not born from anger, or malice. Simply a necessity to achieve a goal.

She hums, her eyes stuck on his face.

"An FBI trainee named Miriam Lass was investigating private medical records of all the known victims when she disappeared. She is believed to be the Ripper's ninth."

"But not his last?"

"Probably not," Will replies, shaking his head, his hand going to Winston's flank and absently petting through his thick pelt. "A man like this doesn't just stop killing. There's an escalation, a shorter time between cooling off periods, and that's just with the murders we know about."

"All in Baltimore?"

"If Shadow Man was with me in Louisiana, there are probably killings there that fit the description as well. He stays where he's comfortable, where he's local."

"So..." She trails off, frowning. Then, her face smooths out in understanding, granted the unique insight into Will's thoughts.

He sighs. "I have to go back," he says. "I need those case files, I need to study them more. Jack won't just let me have them."

She smiles, sad and fond. "Do you think you'll ever be free of this life?" she asks.

"He told me I had to go back to my beginning," Will replies, his eyes lifted to the cloudless sky. The air is getting cold, the sky turning pink and orange as the sun settles on top of the trees, ready to bed down for the night. "Well, I'm back. But this isn't where I belong. I belong where he is. If that is Baltimore, then that's where I must go."

"He might not be there," she argues, giving him the Devil's advocate point of view he desperately clings to whenever he jumps to conclusions too quickly. "He's here. You know he's here."

"He'll go back," Will says. "He'll follow me wherever I go. We're...conjoined. No choice to separate, even if we wanted to."

He turns his eyes down, to the trees and the gate and the nettles behind which the letterbox lies. "I'll write to him tonight," he says. "I'll tell him I'm coming home. The university wants me to lecture on the family annihilator anyway. It's as good an excuse as I'll ever get."

"You'll need someone to watch the house," she replies. "Tend to the dogs."

Will nods. "I think I know who might."

Will locates the local police station – it's a bland, grey building on the outskirts of town, surrounded by the older Victoria models of less-modern and less-funded stations. He gets out of the car and she follows him, a silent shadow at his shoulder as he ducks into the station with John's case file tucked under his arm.

A woman looks up when he approaches. She's the first desk and he goes to her for lack of anything else. She gives him a warm enough smile, but there's impatience at the corner of her eyes. Will knows the feeling intimately – whenever he'd been working a case, anyone coming up to interrupt him had felt like a personal insult.

"Hi. Morning," Will says, and holds the file out to her. "This was left in my mailbox. I was wondering if you might know who checked it out?"

She raises an eyebrow, and takes the folder. She's young, uniformed, her nametag reading 'Jones', her black hair pulled into a tight ponytail. Her hairspray stings Will's nose.

She looks up from the file. "The Martin case?" she says.

Will nods. "I'm the new resident at that house," he tells her. She blinks at him, her frown deepening so that the lines in her forehead become sharp and pronounced. "I don't know if someone wanted me to know the history of the house, or whatever else, but I figured I should return it and try and find out who wanted to give it to me."

"I'll check the records," she says. "Wait here."

Will nods, taking a seat at the other side of her desk. The main area has six stations in total, and two offices in the back with the doors closed, but the blinds open. There's one man in one of the offices – older, probably the man in charge. Even as he notices that, she gets up and walks towards that back office, her eyes over her shoulder like she's checking to make sure Will doesn't bolt.

She stands next to him, arms folded across her chest, scanning the room as Will does. "Who do you think did it?" she asks.

Will huffs, rubbing a hand over his mouth, and settles down deeper in the chair. His head feels tight and tense, like a dehydration headache. He should have eaten before coming here.

The man in the office stands, and Jones comes back out with the file in hand, the man in tow. He's wearing the uniform of a Chief, and he's Alpha. Will can smell it on him with the stink of old coffee and ink.

He stands when the Alpha approaches him. "Good morning," he greets, his accent gentle and rural, the kind of rural that comes out of Pennsylvania. Will shakes his hand when it's offered. The woman sits at her desk and Will sees her pull up a record log, typing in the name 'Martin, John'.

"Morning," Will replies. "Sorry to bother you."

"You're the new meat, right? The one that moved into the Martin house?"

"Yes, Sir," Will replies.

"And you say that this file turned up at your door? No one brought it to you?"

Will shakes his head. "No," he says. "I came home to find it in my mailbox. No idea who put it there. That's why I'm here."

The Alpha nods, pressing his lips together. "No one's touched that file for almost a decade," he says, too-politely.

Will bites his lower lip, averting his eyes. The station is relatively empty, aside from himself, the Chief, and Jones at her desk. There's one other man in the corner by the coffee machine but he doesn't seem to be interested in their presence in the slightest.

"Do you know who might want to?" he asks.

He receives a shake of the head for his answer, and then Jones' computer pings, and she looks up. "Sir," she says, and hands him the file. "This wasn't checked out."

The Chief frowns, taking it.

Will sighs. He had figured as much. "Where do you keep your cold cases?" he asks.

"That's classified, I'm afraid."

"I need a list of whoever might have had access to it."

The Chief blinks at him, and gives Will a slow onceover. "And why should I give that to you?"

"Whoever took the file wanted me to see it. Either they wanted me to know what happened in that house, or it's some kids playing a prank. Either way, wouldn't you want to know who's going in and handing out your cold cases to whoever they see fit?"

"We can handle that in-house," the Chief replies, somewhat coldly.

Will fights the urge to growl. "Look," he says, stepping closer and lowering his voice. "I work for the FBI. You can call my boss. I've been investigating a series of murders and I have reason to believe that John's was one of the first for my killer. Whoever checked out the file might know more information. I need to know who it was."

The other Alpha blinks at him, and then looks down at the file. "Do you still need this, then?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "No," he replies. "I know this case."

"How's that?"

"I'm the one who found the body."

He can feel the tension thicken between the two detectives, and rolls his shoulders, wincing in pain when his injured one starts to ache. The Chief's eyes flicker red, and he gives Will another onceover, clearly wondering if Will's interest in the case goes beyond the casual need for information.

Finally, he sighs. "I can get you that list."

Will nods, letting his neck relax. "Thank you," he says, and tries not to sound too frustrated that it took confessing his job to make it happen. He understands small towns like this – people are close-knit and ready to defend each other to the last. No one wants to think one of their own killed John, but blaming it on some unnamable, outside evil? Far easier to do.

"How soon can you get that list?"

"A few minutes," the Chief replies.

Will nods, and sits back down. "I'll wait."

The Chief and Jones exchange a look, and then the Alpha nods. "Get it done," he says, and goes back into his office.

She looks at him, and then at her computer, pressing her lips together. She's too young to have recognized Will on sight, or to have been alive when the murder took place, but towns like this remember that kind of tragedy for centuries.

"You really think the guy who did this has been killing all these years?" she whispers, when the list is complete and printing out by her desk.

Will nods, and takes the list from her. He scans it briefly, not recognizing any names. "Who else might have known about the case?" he asks. "Or wanted to look at cold cases? For academic reasons, or anything else?"

"We don't get a lot of folks like that around here," she replies with a sigh. Will stands, and she follows suit. "We're not exactly high on the rate of statistics, even for murders as brutal as that one."

Will nods, sighing. "Well, if you think of anything, please let me know," he says, and hands her one of the few business cards he kept with him, this one with his new number scrawled across the back. She takes it, setting it by her keyboard with a nod.

"Shadow Man, I had another bad dream."

"About your friend?"

"No. This one was about you."

"What happened, darling?"

"I dreamed you were in a glass cage. There was no way out, and I stood on the other side. I was trying to get to you, but I couldn't find any fault in the glass. I felt like there was a vast emptiness behind me, and you were all I could see. I was afraid to turn my back on you."

"Why were you afraid?"

"I don't know. What does it mean?"

"You see me as something unattainable, something you cannot reach as hard as you might try. And behind you, the world pulls you away from me. Our dreams reveal our deepest, darkest thoughts, my daydreamer. Perhaps you are afraid of forgetting me."

"I don't think I could ever do that."

"I know, my darling. Just as I will never forget you. I know there have been times when I cannot write to you, when I cannot see you. Those days haunt me, like opportunities I will always miss. Every moment spent away from you stretches on like a lifetime."

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"Soon, Will. You're almost ready. And so am I. The place I have prepared for us both is almost complete."

"I don't even know what you look like. What you sound like. I'm terrified that I could have met you already, and wouldn't even know."

"Some things are just instinctive, my daydreamer. You must be patient, and trust what your heart tells you. You will find me when the time is right."

"Will?"

"Alana," Will murmurs, smiling at the sound of her voice. She always puts him at ease, even in her anger or her grief. "How are you?"

"Good. Really good. How are you?" she replies warmly. "How's the house shaping up?"

"They've run into a few snags. It's taking longer than I'd hoped," he lies. Will never made a habit of lying in his youth, but since working for the FBI, they feel as natural as a set of clothes on his skin. Ironical, he thinks, considering the profession. He hates the amount of walls he has had to build up in the last few years, and wonders if they might have contributed to the fact that his fire has all but died out.

"That's a shame," she says, trusting because Will has given her no reason not to be. "But you're doing okay?"

"I'm alright. I'm going to be in Baltimore for a few days during a guest lecture, actually. I was hoping to see you."

She pauses, and when she speaks again, her voice is thick with joy; "Of course! You can stay with me, if you'd like."

"I couldn't impose," Will replies, smiling. Deborah left him a tray of cookies on his front porch while he was out. They're white chocolate cranberry bites and they're delicious and sweet. He's already eaten half of them, in desperate need of the calories. "I'll be staying in a hotel."

After all, if Shadow Man writes to him again, he can't explain how he received letters at Alana's house, and he doesn't have the energy to hide them. He's sitting at his tarp-covered table, the tray of cookies in front of him, Shadow Man's letter from the morning before splayed out next to it.

"When will you be in town?"

"I'm driving over tomorrow night," Will replies. "I'll be in town for a few days."

"I have a dinner invitation on Friday, but I'm free any other time," she says.

"No lectures?" he asks, frowning.

"Those don't count," she says. "And I can arrange a substitute. I wouldn't miss a second of Will-time if I can help it."

He smiles, unable to stop himself. Through his life he has never had such a loyal and steadfast friend, except for Shadow Man. "Do I get to meet Margot?" he asks, teasing.

She laughs, and it's a soothing, warm sound. "You're terrible," she replies.

"So that's a 'Yes', then," he says.

"Stop," she says, and if Will were standing right in front of her, he knows he'd receive a playful slap on the arm for his teasing. "Well, I can't wait to see you. I know you haven't been

gone long, but I miss you terribly."

"I miss you, too," he replies, voice turning quiet. His fingers curl around the edge of the letter and he wonders how it's possible to long for such vastly different things; Shadow Man, in his darkness, and Alana, calling him to the light. "I'll let you know when I have a room and we'll set something up."

"Sounds good. Be safe," she says, and ends the call with a fond farewell.

As Will sets his phone down, she appears on the other side of the table, her eyes on the cookies. She presses her lips together and sits forward, idly playing with the edge of her scarf. "What're you thinking?" she asks.

"I need to tell Shadow Man I'm going to be in Baltimore," Will replies. "I want to see him again, before I go, but I know he won't come."

His eyes fall to the letter. Shadow Man told him he wouldn't come to Will again until Will knew the truth. He understands the sentiment – consent when one of the parties doesn't know the other isn't consent at all – but he still feels hollow and aching, wishing Shadow Man would have touched him more, kissed him more, spent hours in his bed clawing the place for himself into Will's chest.

"You're his weakness," she tells him. "He'll come if you ask him to."

"I won't put him in that position."

"You show more loyalty to him than he deserves," she says sharply. "He's called the shots all this time, groomed and molded you into what he wants. Your agency and your free will have always been a plaything for him. Why do you keep playing?"

Will frowns, and bites his lower lip. "Do you think I have free will?" he asks her. "Does it even count when all I want to do is be with him?"

"This is Stockholm Syndrome."

"This is just following my nature," Will replies. "Finding my mate, finding my home. Animals do it all the time. Do you think the wolf resents the forest he was born in for its boundaries, or a bird the limitations of the wind? They are not trapped. They live freely within what they know, and he is all I know. He's all I want."

"You had a chance to live free," she says quietly. "You still have that chance."

"Exactly," Will replies. "And I still choose to follow him." He meets her eyes, and tilts his head to one side. "You're fading."

She smiles. "Soon I'll be replaced with a shadow," she says. "Your thoughts are consumed by him. He sets your brain on fire for his own amusement."

"One could argue that you're only being so defensive now out of a sense of self-preservation."

"If that's the case, it's because a part of you still wants me here," she replies coolly, arching an eyebrow. "I am something he cannot touch, and cannot control. Once you lose me, there's nothing left except what he made you into."

"Don't you want to rest?" Will asks, shaking his head. "I want to rest. I'm so tired."

She is silent for a long moment, and then she sighs. "You need to find someone who'll take care of Winston and Addy while you're gone."

He nods, standing. "You're right," he says. He grabs his keys and phone and heads back out to his car.

Will drives to the only public school in town – with a population this small, people don't have the luxury of being choosy as to where they send their children for education unless they want to drive out of town for it, which most people in places like this tend not to do.

He spies Molly and Elijah immediately. He gets out of the car, and their Husky mix barks in recognition as he approaches, tail wagging wildly as she sniffs at Will's shoes.

"Will," Elijah greets, his gold-blue eyes shining warmly. "How are you?"

"Good," Will replies, avoiding Molly's sharp eyes. "I was hoping to have a word with you, in private, if I may."

"Of course," Elijah says, trusting because he has no reason not to. It's so strange to Will how many people just accept that someone has a better nature and that their best foot forward is their only foot.

They walk back to Will's car and Will turns, sighing, and runs a hand through his hair. "I looked over John's case file," he says. Elijah's eyes darken, old grief rising to the surface, and he nods. "I'm going back to Baltimore to add his case to the list of knowns by a serial killer who I believe was responsible for his murder."

The Omega blinks at him, eyes widening. "You think there's more?"

"I'm sure of it," Will says.

He nods. "What does this have to do with me?"

Will presses his lips together, sighing. "I know I have no right to ask this, especially of you," he begins, "but I was hoping you might be able to check in with my dogs while I'm away. I don't know how long I'll be gone, and they're good animals, easy to take care of, but I want to make sure someone I trust is taking care of them and making sure they stay fed."

Elijah regards him for a long, long moment. "I can do that," he finally says. "But I'd ask you to bring them to the house. I don't...I can't go back to that place."

Even better. "Thank you so much," Will says, and flattens a hand on Elijah's shoulder in a brief, placative touch. He doesn't miss how Elijah's eyes darken and a small tremor runs down his spine. It's a natural reaction for an Omega to have at the touch of an Alpha, but it startles him all the same. He pulls his hand away immediately, fingers curling. "Can I bring them by tomorrow morning?"

"Of course," Elijah says. Then he hears Molly calling for them and gives Will a wan, thin smile. "I live near the police station, on the corner of Maple and Third. We have a red mailbox. Can't miss it."

"Thank you," Will says with another nod. "I'll be by around ten."

"See you then," Elijah says, and retreats to his family. Will goes tense, seeing Molly's sharp, dark eyes on him, and he sighs and ducks into his car. He supposes it's natural for a child to be suspicious of a single Alpha speaking so intimately with one's mother, but he hopes that, if he does manage to figure out who killed John, he can bring some peace to her mind.

He won't tell her the name, of course. He'll have to make up some lie – that Shadow Man was arrested on other crimes or died in an accident, or some such thing. Something for closure, without having to give away the whole gambit.

She's in the passenger seat when he drives away from the school, and sighs over the hum of his engine. "Lies and secrets flock together like birds," she tells him.

"There's safety in numbers."

"Do you feel safe?" she asks.

Will smiles, faint and fond. "Did you feel safe?" he asks her. "When the bodies piled up higher and higher, when your father started getting impatient and left less time between his kills, when you sat next to a girl on the train and pinned her as your next target? Did that make you feel safe?"

"You have no idea how I felt," she says sharply. "You have no idea what it's like to know that at any moment a monster could turn its claws on you, should you disappoint it."

Will huffs a laugh, and rolls his eyes. "Don't I?"

"It's different," she says. "You're hardly a prey animal."

"Everything is prey to a killer," he replies. "Leopards attack crocodiles and kill them just as easily as that same crocodile might feast on a buffalo, just as a buffalo might pick a fight with an antelope and win. And even then, the leopard must submit to Man's dominion. Circle of life, et cetera."

"Circles don't end," she murmurs. "This one does."

"And we must decide, when it ends, where we fall between the line of predator and prey. I choose not to be a victim. I don't think you can say the same."

She huffs, crosses her arms over her chest, and moves away from him in the car, disappearing between one blink and the next. He rolls his eyes. "Sulk all you want," he tells the empty air. "You know I'm right."

That night, Will packs up a bag of dog food, the dog beds, and Winston and Addy's favorite chew toys into the back of his car, along with a suitcase full of clothes, his laptop, and his stack of Shadow Man's letters, with the latest ones added to it.

He writes a new one, and puts it into the letterbox before heading to bed.

"Shadow Man,

I'm coming home, to Baltimore. I'm going to find you. I want you to promise me that when I do, you will not turn me away. Not after everything. I've never demanded anything of you, but I demand this;

If you love me, even a fraction of how much I love you, you will not try to trick me. You will not hide away in the darkness. I will never forgive you if you do.

I'm coming. Ready or not."

He sleeps fitfully, his body tense and ready to hear any creak of the door, a footstep outside his bedroom, a rustle in the leaves or the grass outside. Nothing comes, and Will is wide awake when dawn breaks and the birds start to sing.

He rushes downstairs, checks the table, and the door. There's nothing. No letter, no response. He goes to the letterbox and sees that, while there is no reply there either, his initial letter is gone.

He swallows back the anxious, irritated crawl of the skin on the back of his neck as he makes his way slowly to his house. He hopes he didn't overstep – he had been brave last night, brazen, incensed with whiskey and determination and confidence. But it's easy to be confident at night, with no one's eyes on you. Now, the sun feels too garish and bright, and all his secrets and dirtiness are exposed.

A flutter of white catches his eye, and he sucks in a breath, seeing a piece of paper tucked into the windshield wiper of his car at the driver side. He rushes to it, unfolds it to see Shadow Man's dark script coloring the page;

"How easy a fire roars again when given just a little bit of freedom. I'm ready for you, my darling. I ache for the moment when you're once again in my arms, and I vow that once we are united, we will never be apart.

Happy hunting."

Joy explodes in his chest, sharp and hard enough to hurt. His face splits into a wide smile, and a laugh bubbles up from his throat. He's so giddy with relief and delight that for a moment he can barely stand, and collapses against the side of the car, his shaking hands clutching the letter tightly.

He's *ready*. They're both *ready*. Will doesn't think he's ever been this excited in his life.

He has to wait for Harrison to arrive, and for ten to roll around so he can drop off his dogs. He's full of energy and can't sleep, and he's already packed, so he does the only thing he can think of.

He mows the lawn.

It hurts his shoulder to do it, but he's so bright and breathless with anticipation, that the pain actually helps to keep him focused, keeps his eyes sharp and stops his heart trying to leap out of his chest with every beat. It takes him several hours, and by the time he's done, Harrison and his crew are within the house once again, and Will is sweaty and covered in grass stains and pollen, but it's done, and the yard looks far more manageable and approachable by the time he wheels the lawnmower back into place at the side of his house and covers it with a tarp.

He goes inside and finds Harrison at the foot of the stairs, and clears his throat, drawing the man's attention.

"How goes the war?" he asks, too excited to appear calm and aloof as he normally tries to be. He's sure his scent stinks of joy.

Harrison smiles at him. "Steady progress," he says.

"Good," Will replies with a nod. "I'm going to be out of town for a few days. I'm leaving now. Just leave the key in the mailbox or whatever you need to do. I'll probably be back this weekend, and even if not, just call me when it's done, and I'll send you a check for the rest of the payment."

"Alright," Harrison says with a cordial nod. He shakes Will's hand, and Will smiles again, whistling for his dogs, and heads towards the car. "Safe travels, Mister Graham!"

Will lets the dogs into the backseat, and drives to Elijah's house. He finds it easily, and pulls up in front of the driveway outlet. There are sprinklers on in the front yard, a collection of windchimes that Will suspects are part of the HOA or something since everyone seems to have them, and as he parks the car, Elijah comes out of the front door with a welcoming smile.

Will lets his dogs out and they barrel over to Elijah, sniffing his hands, tails wagging, friendly as ever. "Thank you again for this," he says. "It really means a lot to me."

"Just find the man who did this," Elijah replies with a nod.

"I promise," Will breathes, hardly able to speak for how giddy with anticipation he is. "I will."

Elijah nods, and Will gets back in his car. He does a tight U-turn and barrels towards the toll road across the bay, and he has never been happier to see the bay, or the trees clear from forest to suburb to city, or for the skyline of Baltimore to rise up and greet him in the midmorning sun like the sparkling promise of the city of gold.

He checks into a Hyatt a few blocks away from the university and brings his bag inside. First, he has to shower. He stinks of forest and grass, and he wants to cleanse himself of that small town with smiling people and gossip that spreads like hives.

When he gets out of the shower, his phone is ringing. It's not Alana, and he frowns. "Hello?"

"Will."

It's Jack. Will sighs. "How'd you get this number?"

"Are you kidding? I've been tracking your credit card since you left. Not hard to figure out the number you used to register once I did."

Will growls into the phone. "And why are you tracking me?" he demands. "Pretty sure that violates some human rights law."

"I always keep track of my people," Jack replies gruffly.

"I'm not your people," Will says. "I never was."

Jack huffs. "Sure. And I found out you're going to be guest lecturing this week. Family annihilators that much more interesting than the work you did for me?"

"I'm not doing the work I did for you," Will says. "I left that behind."

"You didn't run far," Jack replies quietly. "You've got a taste for blood now, Will. You can't stop yourself, can you?"

Will doesn't answer. He contemplates hanging up and changing out his phone, but that would be more hassle than it's worth. He can just block Jack's number.

"So," Jack continues, smug, setting Will's teeth on edge, "what brings you back to Baltimore?"

"It's personal," Will replies sharply. "And I don't owe you that answer."

"We could use you here, Will," Jack says. "You've had your time away, I've given you space. But I need you here, where you can make a difference. Don't you want to make a difference?"

"Goodbye, Jack," Will snarls, and hangs up the phone, throwing it onto the bed. He sighs, and sits down, running both hands through his sodden hair.

He should have known better than to think he could come back to Baltimore without drawing attention. Jack's eyes are everywhere. It's worse than small town gossip.

But he had to come back. Shadow Man is here, Will is sure of it. He's here and he's ready to meet, and Will just has to find him. To catch the killer that has eluded the FBI for decades. He knows he can do it – he will do it, because Shadow Man believes he can. So he has to.

He can't afford to disappoint.

Alana picks him up at the hotel that night, and Will embraces her tightly when she greets him in the lobby, his face tucked into her neck and breathing in her soft scent as deeply as he can. She hugs him back just as tightly, like she hadn't believed he would come back and now that he's here, she has to make sure.

He smells two sets of perfume on her, and when he pulls back, he cups her face with one hand, his smile wide and happy. "It's good to see you," he murmurs.

"You too," she replies, tears brightening her eyes. How different from the last time he saw her – not pained, anymore, but lit up with relief and happiness. She pulls him into another hug, tight enough to strain his shoulder, but he doesn't complain. "You look good. You been taking care of yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replies with a lazy salute, and she rolls her eyes and hits his good shoulder. "Now, come on, you're taking me to dinner and I want to hear all about the lovely lady who's caught your eye."

She rolls her eyes, but accepts his offered arm, and tucks her hand into the crook of his elbow as they walk out of the hotel and to her car. "Honestly, between you and Margot it's a wonder I don't combust from excitement."

"Oh?" he asks, grinning at her.

"You're both terrible when it comes to curiosity," she says. "She wants to meet you, too, since I mentioned you."

"Is she coming to dinner?"

"No," Alana replies with a sigh. "She has an event or something tonight. Charity, I think. She's kind of a socialite and it comes with the territory."

"Oh, how awful for you, dating a rich and beautiful woman," Will says, earning another slap on his shoulder. "Your hits have gotten harder."

"Well, I haven't been able to slap you for a while. It builds up."

"In that case, let 'em fly. It's for your own good."

She rolls her eyes again, and lets him go so he can slide into the passenger seat. There are a collection of essays and a card on the seat and he picks them up, holding them in his lap.

"You can put those in the back," she tells him.

"What's this?" he asks, picking up the card. "Looks fancy."

"It's my dinner invite," she replies. "I'm allowed to bring a plus one, if you're interested in fine dining. His food is to die for."

"I don't want to impose," Will says. The thought of wasting any time when he could be profiling the Ripper makes his stomach turn.

"Well, fine then. Don't mess with it."

He smiles, and turns the card over, catching her name written in dark calligraphy. Then, his breath catches. His fingers shake.

The writing looks very *familiar*.

He presses his lips together, and looks at her. "Who writes custom invitations these days?" he asks, his voice trembling.

"Doctor Lecter," she replies with a smile. "You remember him? I shadowed him during my dissertation. He was my advisor."

"I've met him," Will says, looking down at the card again. He opens it, unable to stop himself. "He did my psyche eval before I quit."

"...Oh."

He opens the card, pulling out a thick piece of stock covered in the same dark script. A script he recognizes intimately. The same that has covered letters spanning back to when he was eight years old, curling letters that have colored the backs of his eyelids and haunted his dreams.

Shadow Man.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter requests the pleasure of your company for dinner, this Friday night, 7 p.m." Will can't breathe.

"Agent Graham? This is Amelia Jones. I'm the detective you turned the Milton case in to."

Will nods, though she can't see him. "Did you find anything?" he asks.

"Well, it's weird. The autopsy report was conducted in-house, by our resident M.E., but there was another doctor in at the time and he was called in for a consult regarding the missing kidney."

Will frowns. "Do you have his name?"

"Yeah. It's Lecter. Doctor Hannibal Lecter."

Behind his eyes, Will's one and only conversation with Doctor Lecter replays like a movie. Talks of darkness, and God. Killing just to see what would happen – the answer that had led him to the first piece of Shadow Man's puzzle. A scent and a voice hidden because Will would recognize it – he would recognize it because he was *there*. He was there at the site of the copycat's murder. Will remembers seeing him speaking with Jack, because Jack had been afraid of Will's devolution, had ordered his therapy right after Hobbs' murder.

He'd been there while Will was in college, helping Alana with her thesis.

He'd been living in Harrogate when John was killed; a visiting consultant on his autopsy.

He could have been there on the docks, watching Will, buying oysters while Will trailed after his father, fixing boat engines. In Louisiana, monitoring Will's progress through school. In the stands at his soccer games. In the audience when he received his diploma.

To think, it hadn't come down to a profile. Hadn't come down to a chase. One wayward letter in a friend's car was all it took.

Coincidence? Shadow Man is hardly so lazy, so uncontrolled.

Talk of instincts, of dark places. That smile on his face when Will talked of instincts and games.

He'd known. He'd sat there and probed Will's mind, all the while seeing Will as he was; a burning ember just waiting for fresh air to rage again.

Will isn't sure what he's feeling. It's too urgent for anger, too breathless for relief. Too brilliant to be joy.

He slides the card back into the envelope, lest he tear it from gripping it too hard. He remembers the man's mouth, touches his lower lip and feels the sting of his teeth. He

remembers the man's scent, his refinement worn like his tailored suits. His big, strong hands; Will hears him playing piano and his vision starts to blur.

"Are you alright?" Alana asks. Her voice is distant, like she's calling for him from a long way away.

"Yeah," Will says, clearing his throat. He sets the card down as gently and calmly as he's able. "You know, I might take you up on this offer. I could use some fancy food."

"You don't think I'll feed you well enough?" she asks. She's teasing, but Will can tell she's pleased. She has always tried to get him to socialize.

"I want to go," Will says, too frazzled to think of a clever, witty response. His lungs are burning, his head feels hot, his eyes prickling with red. Hannibal Lecter is Shadow Man. Will remembers thinking how, if anyone could have turned his attentions away, it would have been him. He wants to laugh at himself; he should have trusted his gut.

She smiles, and squeezes his hand. "Good," she says softly. "I'll let him know you're coming."

Will feels a tremor run down his spine, and he squeezes her hand gently in return, nervous energy sparking in his chest and drying out his mouth. Shadow Man will know he's coming, by the end of the night. He wonders, and hopes, and can barely breathe.

Finally, *finally*.

In the side mirror, the reflection of the ghost of Abigail Hobbs sits in the back seat. She catches Will's eye, smiles, and fades away.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

okay I SWEAR TO GOD part 5 will be the last chapter. I'm a fool, I don't know why I pretend to know how long fics are going to be. can you believe I thought this would only be two parts? *canned laughter*

I pulled another all-nighter for this one. 1 am to 5, plus proofreading. I think I ascended into the astral plane.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He feels like something should be different. The air should be clearer, the sun brighter, the wind gentler. There should be something external to match the rushing thrum of his heart as he enters the university building and heads towards the lecture hall he's due to appear at. Something visible in his eyes, the shake of his hands, the clench of his jaw, to mark the about-face his entire world has come to in the brief time since returning to Baltimore.

He knows who Shadow Man is. Twenty-seven years of being watched, of sharing letters and riddles and proclamations of love, of having a hunter's eyes on him, a killer's scent teasing his nose, and it has all come down to this. Tonight, he will be in the home of the man who has thoroughly claimed every shred of Will's being for himself. Tonight, he will look into the eyes of a monster, and see himself reflected in them, nothing hidden, no holds barred.

He enters the lecture hall, seeing that already half the seats are full despite the fact that they're not due to start for another half hour. At the front of the room he spies an Alpha dressed in a sharp suit, black and lacking any kind of flair. He looks up when Will enters, and beckons him over.

"You must be Agent Graham," he says, shaking Will's hand. He has deep frown lines around his mouth and eyes, grey hair at the temples, and indents on either side of his nose where glasses normally sit. Probably uses them to drive. There's a tan line of a wedding ring around his finger, but no ring itself.

"And you, Agent Fischer," Will replies, receiving a nod. "I've studied your work. Great catch with Green River."

Fischer smiles, the kind of smile proud men have when trying to be humble. "And you," he says. "I've heard a lot about you, and your accomplishments."

"Well-earned, in my opinion."

Will goes tense, growling under his breath when he hears Jack's voice. He turns, his eyes raking over those students already gathered, as well as working professionals who wish to

keep up to date or have an academic interest in the subject. Jack appears from the crowd like a stage magician with all the pomp of one, at his side is Beverly. She gives Will a thin, uncomfortable smile as Jack approaches and shakes Fischer's hand.

"You couldn't have waited one more day?" Beverly asks with a roll of her eyes. Her scent is sharp, like she's trying to appear so outwardly calm that it affects the Feng Shui of the whole room. "I had you for the holiday weekend."

"I'm not technically back," Will replies, remembering Alana mentioning the betting pool. "Who had the lecture?"

"Jimmy," Beverly says with a roll of her eyes. "He thinks you like to preach."

"I think of it as a warning," Will says. "But if everyone was as observant as we are, we'd be out of a job."

She huffs a laugh and claps him on the arm. "It's good to see you, Will," she says warmly.

Fischer clears his throat, and Will turns his attention to the man and Jack. Jack is watching him in the same way a lion watches the rest of his pack hunt – lazy, knowing that the prey will come to him. Will fights the urge to bare his teeth, but can't stop his chin rising in a brief show of defiance.

"If you don't mind, Agent Crawford, Ms. Katz," Fischer says. "I'd like to get started."

"Of course. Have a good lecture, Agent," Jack says, and then nods to Will. "Will." Will presses his lips together, his fingers curl, and he wonders if he complained enough, that Shadow Man would turn his attentions towards Jack, avenging any personal slight in the form of Will's discomfort.

Dangerous thoughts, but ones he doesn't mind harboring. Thoughts are just thoughts.

"Shall we?" Fischer asks with a wide, peacocking smile, and Will nods, taking a seat beside Fischer as they wait for the rest of the classroom to fill. Standing room only, Will notes, and wonders which of their names garnered the most attention.

"Shadow Man, will you tell me something else about you?"

"What would you like to know?"

"Tell me about this place you have for us, the one you're preparing."

"Gladly, my dear. But I want you to understand – it is not a physical location."

Will frowns, reading the letter. He's sixteen and Chris is home, suspended from school after his fifth year of trying to get a degree worth a damn, after he'd picked a fight with a group of

Alphas after a frat party when they'd gotten a little too casual with an Omega. Chris has always been that particularly reckless flavor of White Knight.

"What is it, then?"

"Are you familiar with the idea of a mind palace?"

"Is that like a happy place?"

"You could call it that. Often it is used as a tool for memory recall. You create a room, or a house, or anywhere you'd like in your mind, and you fill it with memories, facts, or things you want to come back to, and revisit. There is an entire wing in my mind palace for you, my darling. But it is not yet finished. The walls are being built, the floor laid down."

"I don't need anything fancy," Will had written back. "But wherever we end up, I'd like it to be near a stream. Somewhere I can go fishing."

"Whatever you desire, my daydreamer, I will make it so."

"Anna Stolar killed three families during her spree in the summer of two-thousand-thirteen. She watched the families while the fathers – and, in the last case, the female parent on active duty – were deployed overseas. All three families were residents close to Langley Air Base. Anna was a paranoid schizophrenic with severe PTSD, which manifested in her need to recreate the mass graves she had borne witness to as a child in Croatia."

"When a child is that young," Will begins, taking over when Fischer gestures to him, "and in all children, they have an abundance of mirror neurons – these are what help children develop social behavior, and things like empathy and compassion. These neurons provoke a reactionary response. Born in the midst of so much violence and a strong military presence, Anna grew up surrounded by images of war. It was all she knew."

Children are so impressionable. They have no choice. Will wonders what might have happened to him had John never shown him that letterbox, had never opened the door for Shadow Man to step through. Would he have still wanted to be a detective, to fight the good fight and put bad people away? He looks over the rows of students and curious academics and doesn't see himself in any of them.

"Anna targeted the families when the primary threats were neutralized. In these cases, it was the Alpha of the house, and the female soldier. She killed three adults and ten children in the three scenes."

"The death of the daughters is what linked the families together," Will continues. "They had no prior contact, nothing connecting them except for their location and their ties to the military. Anna shot the mothers and the male children, and the daughters died due to asphyxiation with a plastic bag, strangulation, and drowning, in order."

"With family annihilators, the signature that manifests can usually be identified by how the children are treated," Fischer finishes. "The daughters were all killed alone, and last, and through a different method. Annihilators like Anna are organized, capable killers. They never start with families. There will always be other crimes – break-ins, assaults, and single-victim murders. This will form a timeline of escalation."

Will presses his lips together, looking down at his feet. His fingers curl around the back of his chair and he sighs, and turns to look up at the screen, where a mass grave of the last family is projected.

"Another notable family annihilator is Eva Kingsley," Will says, as Fischer presses his remote and the slides move to a picture of a stern-faced woman, her DMV photograph set ten feet high and her eyes dark, staring Will down. "She abducted Omegas from their homes, conditioned them to behave like her own children, and a year after their abductions, she would take them back to their families and have her children kill their birthparent."

He remembers that scene. He'd sat in the Turner house and seen the forgiveness in Missus Turner's eyes. The image flashes to that very woman, a single gun shot wound in her forehead, and he shivers, able to feel the gun in his hand like he'd shot her himself.

"Again, she took the children young enough to groom them," he says. "Omegas have an abundance of mirror neurons, even more than their Alpha and female counterparts. Being female, Eva was able to enforce her will on these children without succumbing to the natural manipulative whines and purrs of Omegas and Alphas. Through this, she was able to subdue the abductee's birth family and carry out her designed execution."

A hand goes up in the front row, and Will's eyes flash to Fischer. He isn't sure if there's supposed to be a question and answer segment of this lecture. He hopes not – it will drag on far too long if that is the case, and Will needs time. He needs time to mentally and physically prepare himself for dinner tonight with Alana and Doctor Lecter. He needs to be strong.

Fischer smiles, and nods to the woman in the front row. "Is it fair to say that most killers who target large groups like family units would be female?"

"The only advantage a woman has is that she will not be cowed or coerced by an Alpha or Omega Voice," Will replies before Fischer can answer. "She must still be strong, and intelligent, to be able to subdue so many and maintain control. Statistically, most serial killers are Alpha." He straightens up, catches Fischer's eye, sees the man frowning at him.

"Alphas are prideful," he says. "Most killings can boil down to a matter of pride."

"Pride?" she asks, frowning.

Will nods, and averts his eyes from her, looking over the room. "Everyone has thought about killing someone," he says, and remembers the last time he heard this phrase, in this very room, when he was still young and soft and a flickering light. "Be it an act of God, or your own hand. Think back to a time when you might have wished someone dead, or gone from your life. How did you feel, in that moment?"

He pauses, not expecting an answer, but the woman speaks anyway; "Angry," she says.

Will smiles. "And why were you angry?" he asks her, but doesn't wait for her to answer. "Think of those times. A personal slight, or maybe someone hurt a person you cared about. A man beats his wife, and her best friend kills him. Because of anger – because of pride, of a self-imposed moral compass that we like to attribute to good upbringing or belief in a higher power. But it's a sense of worth. You are not *worth* anything, to the people who wrong you. The insurance agent who denies your mother the money she needs for her cancer treatment; the contractor building your pool who looks at your daughter just a little too long; the boyfriend who tells you he loves you one moment, then beats you the next."

Fischer clears his throat, and Will looks over at him, and swallows harshly enough that his throat clicks. "Everyone has a breaking point," he says, more gently this time, and meets the woman's wide eyes. "But a family annihilator acts on very specific fantasies. For Anna, it was getting revenge for her own family's slaughter. For Eva, it was creating the perfect family unit that she couldn't have. Statistically, and historically, women are merciful with their kills."

"An Alpha would have taken his time with the family," Fischer says. "It would be more about asserting dominance than fulfilling a task. Alphas who target large groups hunt for longer – they are less patient than their female and Omega counterparts, and so the reward must be worth the risk, and the hunt, for them."

And twenty-seven years is a long time to hunt. Will turns away, hiding his smile.

"I saw you today, daydreamer. You look tired. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I'm just having trouble sleeping."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Probably should. My friend wants me to talk about things like that, but I can't with her."

"It's good to have friends that care about you, Will, especially since I cannot be there to help you as I want. Do you not think you can trust your friend with what's troubling you?"

"No. I can't explain stuff like this to her."

"What kind of things can't you explain?"

"You. My feelings for you. My dreams."

"I wish I could be with you, darling. I know you're getting impatient with me."

"That's one word for it."

"Perhaps it will give you comfort to know that, just as you are suffering, I am as well. But it will not always be this way."

"You know, I've heard of people who meet their mates online, and they don't meet until much later. Years pass, phone calls and emails and texts late at night. It always sounded stupid to me as a child."

"Because you cannot love someone you've never met?"

"You know that's not true."

"Then, why?"

"Your letters are intimate. Handwriting is personal. I would take it any day over a text at three in the morning telling me you miss me. I come home every day, praying there's another letter from you. I've thought about setting up cameras, to try and get your face. But I won't."

"You have a natural inclination towards puzzles and games, darling. It's one of the things I fell in love with."

"But this isn't just a game, is it?"

"No, my daydreamer. This has always been so much more."

Will finishes the lecture, dodges the guests that crowd around the front desk, wanting to congratulate and applaud Fischer on the numerous cases he has solved. He keeps his head low and his eyes downcast as he hurries out of the building and to his car.

He drives back to his hotel room, white-knuckling the wheel. He has four hours before Alana is due to pick him up and he thinks he might be sick with anticipation.

He goes up to his room and his phone rings as he sets his bag down. "Hello?"

"Mister Graham? It's Harrison."

"Afternoon," Will greets, sitting down on the end of his bed, glad for the distraction.

"Just wanted to check in. We've fixed the drywall and have a pump placed in the basement. Everything's going smoothly, and we should be done by the end of the day."

"Excellent," Will replies. "I really appreciate all your hard work, and your timeliness."

"Of course. Will you be back in town this weekend?"

Will bites his lower lip. He had intended to be, when he thought he would have to spend more time profiling the Ripper. But he knows who the Ripper is now – who Shadow Man is now –

and what happens tonight will shape the rest of his life.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," he says. "But if you tell me your address, I'll send you the check for the rest of the bill."

"Much obliged," Harrison says, and Will stands, going to the little notepad on the bedside table.

He freezes when he sees it. There's a note there, a stock card like the invitation Alana received. It's addressed to 'Will Graham'.

"Mister Graham? You still there?"

"Uh, yeah." Will clears his throat, his palms sweating. He runs a hand through his hair and sits back down on the side of the bed, pushes the card to one side to free the notepad up, and grabs a pen. "Whenever you're ready." Harrison tells him the address and Will repeats it back, with a promise to mail him the check this afternoon.

He ends the call and sets his phone down, overly-careful, like if he moves too quickly, the card will sprout wings and flutter out of reach. He takes it, his hands shaking, and turns it over.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter requests the pleasure of your company for dinner, tonight, 7 p.m." Another invitation – an official one. Shadow Man knows he's coming. He came here, to Will's room, he was in Will's room, and left his letter by the bed.

Will hates how his heart flutters and his shoulder aches, knowing he was *here*. Will could have caught him, if the lecture hadn't been happening. But if it hadn't, Will would have no excuse to come back. He wouldn't have been out of the room, and Shadow Man wouldn't have come. He'd have paid someone to deliver it.

Tonight. *Tonight*. Will is going to meet the love of his life tonight – they will stand as they once were, all those years ago. He tries to picture that moment, but it's as faded as the first memory of John's body, the sepia-colored edges of his smile.

He's so sick with excitement and nerves. Even though he hasn't eaten – she's not around anymore to remind him to do it – he thinks he might throw up.

He showers, spending more time than usual in the bathroom to make sure he's as presentable as possible. He shaves his beard, washes his hair three times, and when he's done, he goes back out into the bedroom in just a towel, combing his fingers through his hair to get it to dry as quickly as it naturally can.

He understands this behavior, absently. He's never done it before. *Preening*, like animals in the wild. He wants to make himself look as alluring and lovely as possible, but he hasn't given a single moment's thought to that kind of thing before, and he registers, in the back of

his mind, that Shadow Man wouldn't care. He's seen Will sweaty, exhausted, running on nothing but caffeine and stubbornness as he shuffled zombie-like between his finals. He's seen Will young, grass-stained, red-cheeked, with welts on his wrist and lips so chapped they bled when he smiled. He's seen Will trembling with anxiety and joy, seen him lacking a shower for the better part of a week, still kissed him and touched him like he was a beautiful sculpture of diamond.

Will knows he doesn't have to change anything about how he looks to garner Shadow Man's favor, but it doesn't tamp down the instinct to try all the same.

His phone rings, and Alana's name flashes along the screen. He smiles, some relief swelling in his chest, and answers it. "Hey," he says warmly.

"Hey," she replies. "How'd the lecture go?"

"I kind of went off on a rant about pride, but other than that, pretty well," Will replies with a self-deprecating huff. He lays back on the bed, still petting through his hair, and stares at the ceiling. "I got my own personal invite to dinner tonight, too."

"Yeah, I figured you would. He seemed eager to see you again."

Will blinks, and bites his lower lip at the flutter of joy that brings him. "Not sure why," he lies. "I wasn't exactly friendly to him, the one and only time we spoke."

She pauses, and Will frowns. "What is it?" he asks.

"Okay, I'm gonna tell you, but you have to promise not to hate me," she says, child-like and sheepish. He huffs a breath through his nose and rolls his eyes.

"I could never hate you," he replies. "Tell me."

"Well, okay, so I've known Doctor Lecter for years, and he's a great guy. Charming, sophisticated, well-liked. And I thought, well, you never ended up dating anyone and I figured you might be a little more open to the idea in a non-work environment."

Will frowns. Is she seriously...? "Is this meant to be some kind of date?" he asks.

"Not *expressly*," Alana replies. "But, I mean, I know he likes Alphas as much as women or Omegas. And he's really nice and I think he could give you a run for your money in the brains department. I don't know, seemed kind of like a good fit to me."

"Alana," Will sighs. It's been a long time since they talked about Will's love life, or lack thereof. He had honestly hoped she'd forgotten about it. "This is incredibly manipulative, especially for you."

"Hey! I didn't force you to accept the dinner invite," she replies defensively. "You didn't even want to go, and I wasn't going to push it, but now you do, and he wants to see you again. I didn't know he did your evaluation, honestly, but you could stand to have some friends, and Doctor Lecter isn't the judgmental type, Will."

"Does he know you're trying to play matchmaker?" Will asks. He's not sure if he's even upset by this development, or just annoyed for the sake of his own pride. It's one thing to meet Shadow Man, knowing Shadow Man knows he's coming. It's quite another to meet him with explicit romantic overtones.

"No, I swear!" Alana replies. "I told him you were in town and were interested in being my plus one, and he said I should bring Margot and that he'd invite you himself. Which he did. So anything more that happens, my hands are totally clean of it."

"You're the worst," Will says without any heat. He rolls his eyes when her sheepish laugh comes from the other end of the phone. "At least I get to meet Margot out of this," he adds, and smiles when she lets out a high-pitched, offended sound.

"Well, there you go! Silver lining!" she says. "I promise, if you come to this dinner and don't like him at least a *little*, I'll drop it forever and you'll never hear from me about your hermitness until we're both dead."

"Hermitness', huh? They teach you those fancy technical terms during a Doctoral degree?"

"Shut up," she says, fondly exasperated.

"Well, if you have to pick up Margot, I'll make my own way there," Will says, that fluttery feeling coming back. If he doesn't have to wait for Alana, that means he can show up whenever he wants. It means he can leave whenever he wants, too. He can stay – an hour late, the whole night, forever. If Shadow Man lets him.

No. He can't let himself doubt now.

"Sounds good. I'll see you there," she says, and Will smiles, ending the call.

Now he only has three hours to wait until dinner. He's definitely going to throw up.

When Will turns twenty-one, he receives a package from Shadow Man at his dorm. Inside is a box of chocolates, all salted caramel – his favorite – and two folded pieces of paper. One is a letter. The other, a sketch of himself.

"Happy birthday, my daydreamer. I've been thinking of you often lately, more so than usual. I'm so proud of what you've accomplished already – although I have no claim to them, your victories feel like my own. It is very dangerous work you wish to pursue, and I support you in all that you do."

The likeness is incredible. Shadow Man's sketch seems to capture everything Will doesn't see when he looks in a mirror – it's done with pencil, no color, but even still there is a definitive texture to his hair, movement in the shading on his neck. The tiredness in the lines of his face, now placed there as naturally as his beard and his nose. His eyes stare out from the paper, like

he's looking at whoever drew him, and though Will knows it's not possible in a sketch, it feels like at any moment, his own likeness could blink back at him, and smile.

There is a longing, here. Will feels it like a sharp sting at the back of his throat.

Then, his eyes track down. The sketch ends at his collarbone, his neck is bared as though he's looking to the side of himself, and Will's eyes widen, his fingers lightly tracing over the dark, ragged mark of a bite at the side of his likeness' throat.

A mating bite.

"Oh, God," he whispers, his throat tight, his eyes prickling with red. It's a visceral reaction, felt as deep as blood and bone. He bites his lower lip hard enough to hurt, closes his eyes and rakes his nails down the side of his neck, imagines warm breath, sharp teeth, a strong hand under his jaw to keep his neck exposed as Shadow Man bites him, claims him in something irrevocable and primal.

He sets the sketch down, not daring to damage it, and swallows harshly as he digs his nails in. He falls onto his bed, wraps himself under the blankets, and uses his spit and his fingers to touch himself and imagine Shadow Man is there, mounting him brutally in the darkness.

It's the first and only time he touches himself and doesn't feel shame afterwards. How can he, when all he has to do is look at the sketch and know, completely and for the first time, that he's not all alone?

Snap. Snap. *Snap*.

Will sits outside Doctor Hannibal Lecter's house, his car idling, his eyes fixed on the door. Alana isn't here yet, he doesn't see her car. His own vehicle looks very out of place amongst the Lexuses, Bentleys, and Benzes. His wrist hurts terribly but he can't make himself stop tugging at the rubber band around his wrist.

He's wearing the shirt Shadow Man left at his house. He wants to see his face when he sees Will wearing it. It's been washed, thanks to the hotel laundry service, so it only smells like Will now. He has it unbuttoned down low enough to reveal his t-shirt underneath – enough to expose the hollow of his throat – and the sleeves are rolled to his elbows.

It's not his first choice – aesthetically he knows he could have worn something blue, or grey, to bring out his eyes – but it's significant. Shadow Man left him this shirt, and Will wants to see how Doctor Lecter reacts to him wearing it tonight.

He lifts his eyes from the door when he sees headlights approaching, and recognizes Alana's car. He smiles, turns off his vehicle, and gets out as she parks a few spots down from him. She exits the vehicle and another woman gets out of the passenger seat. She's pale, regal, her auburn hair pulled back into a low bun, wearing a black and white dress that stops at her

knees, black heels that put her a little taller than Alana, and a black blazer with a light coat over it. It's too cold for that kind of thing, and Will sees her shiver.

"Will!" Alana greets, waving to him as he approaches. "Hi." Alana embraces him, and Will smiles, hugging her back briefly. "This is Margot. Margot, Will."

"Pleasure," Margot says. Her lips are painted red, her eyes a glassy green that reflect the street lights overhead. She's beautiful in that classical kind of way, the kind that inspires Renaissance artists and sculptors.

"Nice to meet you," Will replies, and lifts her offered hand to kiss her knuckles. Alana rolls her eyes and Margot smiles, close-lipped, her cheeks bulging.

"Alana, you never told me he had such good manners," she says lightly, teasing.

"He doesn't, normally," Alana replies, wrapping her arm around Margot's waist. "He's just behaving because he knows I'll make his life Hell if he doesn't."

"They say one's friends are a reflection of oneself," Will says, teasing. "What does that say about you?"

"That we met too young for me to replace you now," she replies coolly, making Will laugh. It's enough to settle the butterflies in his stomach as they cross the street, onto the sidewalk in front of Doctor Lecter's house. It's a standalone, well-maintained and expensive. The lawn is pristine, but not in the way the houses in Harrogate are. The air stinks of luxury and refinement.

They approach the door, Alana and Margot in front, Will bringing up the rear. Alana knocks, and they stand, waiting. "So, Will," Margot says, turning to look at him. "Alana tells me you work for the FBI?"

Will nods, pressing his lips together. "Recently retired," he replies.

She raises an eyebrow. "Kind of young for that, aren't you?" she asks.

Will smiles thinly. "I still teach at the university," he explains. She nods, accepting that answer. The time stretching on where the door doesn't open feels like an eternity. Will isn't sure where to put his eyes. "And you?"

"My family owns the Verger meat packing company," Margot replies with a smile. Will nods – that makes sense. They're a rich family. He makes a mental note to rib Alana later about managing to catch herself an heiress.

Then, the door opens, and Will's heart goes still.

"Alana." A warm greeting comes, combined with a friendly half-embrace and a kiss to Alana's cheek. Will swallows, the anxiety slamming back into his head with the weight and speed of an avalanche. He knows what Hannibal Lecter looks like, of course, but that was *before*. Now, he has no idea what he'll do when their eyes meet. "Margot, a pleasure to see you again."

"And you, Doctor Lecter," Margot replies, genteel and well-bred.

Then, the women part, and Will lifts his eyes. He's on the lower step, putting himself at the physically lesser position, and he has to turn his face up to meet Doctor Lecter's eyes.

Shadow Man's eyes.

Hannibal's eyes.

There's a moment of stillness. Will isn't sure if he's going to say the right name when he speaks. "Will," Hannibal murmurs, breathes the word like he's giving life back to a dead man. His eyes rake Will up and down, dark and ravenous, and Will swallows. "It's good to see you. You're looking well."

Will swallows harshly, digs his fingers into the pockets of his jacket and clenches his fists. "You, too," he replies, and doesn't miss how Alana and Margot share a smile between them, like two mothers watching their betrothed children meeting for the first time. He clears his throat and ducks his head.

Hannibal steps back, gesturing for them to come in. They do, marching into his home like pigs to slaughter. Hannibal takes Alana's and Margot's coats, hangs them up, and then turns to Will. Alana and Margot head straight to the dining room, clearly at home in the place, and Will's shoulders tense.

He looks at Hannibal, tries to find any crack in the façade, any lurking premeditation on his face. There's nothing but the polite interest of a host welcoming a guest. Will swallows, and shrugs his jacket off, and hands it to him.

"Thanks," he says, and looks down at his feet again.

Hannibal smiles, and holds his hand out to gesture down the hall. "Shall we?"

"How long have you been drawing for, Shadow Man?"

"As long as I can remember. I faded from the practice, for a time. I learned to sketch by mimicking the paintings in galleries and art museums, in my youth. For a long while, I found myself lacking inspiration. Until I found you again."

"It's incredible. I love it."

"I'm very happy to hear that, my daydreamer."

"Smells wonderful, Hannibal," Alana says. She takes her seat at the left side of the table, Margot to her right. Will sits across from her, and Hannibal sits next to Will, on his left, so they make a square around the table. Right now, there is only wine out, and Will resists the urge to down his first glass in one swallow.

He's sitting next to Shadow Man and he is so sick with nerves and happiness that he doesn't know what to do with himself. His hands are shaking, and he presses them tight to his thighs, too nervous of giving himself away to reach for his glass.

"What are we having?"

Hannibal isn't looking at him, meaning Will can steal all the sightlines he wants out of the corner of his eye. He's dressed finely, rich and composed. Will knew Shadow Man would control a room with ease, but knowing it as a fact and experiencing it first-hand is like having a sunset described to you and seeing it yourself. He's sure that his heart is beating so loudly that Hannibal can hear it.

"I've prepared a dish known as 'Beggar's Clay Chicken'," he replies. "Although I've chosen pork for tonight's meal."

"'Beggar's Clay'?" Margot repeats, tilting her head to one side.

Hannibal smiles. "The origin story is that a beggar stole a chicken, and, not wanting it to be discovered, he wrapped it in lotus leaves and cooked it in mud. However, once he cracked opened the clay, a nobleman noticed the scent of chicken and they shared the meal. I thought it appropriate, given the circumstances."

Will swallows. "What circumstances?"

Hannibal looks at him. Will can't bring himself to meet his gaze. "We are all old and new friends," Hannibal says. His fingers are wrapped around the stem of his wine glass, tendons flexing in the back of his hand. Will pictures them wrapped around his neck and he shivers, thighs tensing. "Perhaps, if the night goes smoothly, we might all consider each other comrades. There is little else that bonds people like sharing food."

Will swallows, and thinks back to the wine Shadow Man left him, that they'd shared in the hours after he'd come to Will's house. The wine Hannibal is serving now is the same dark red, and Will manages to steady his hand enough to take a sip. It's thick on his tongue, sour at first and sweetening at the edges, salt turning to caramel. His stomach feels too tight.

"Well," he says, clearing his throat, "I defer to your greater experience, in that regard."

Alana huffs, and Will gets the impression she would try and kick him under the table if there weren't so many other feet in the way. If Hannibal senses the sharpness in Will's tone, he doesn't visibly react, except to take another drink of wine.

"How has your isolation been treating you, Will?" he asks.

Will presses his lips together. "I'm not isolated."

"Will," Alana mutters, "you moved out to a murder house in the middle of nowhere. That's pretty damn isolated."

"Murder house?" Margot repeats, frowning.

Will sighs. "Yes, apparently one of the former residents of the house I bought was killed, many years ago." He forces himself not to look at Hannibal. It will give him away too soon.

"That's awful!" Margot exclaims, covering her mouth.

A beeping sound comes from somewhere behind them, and Hannibal stands. "Excuse me," he says, and leaves the room. Will makes his stomach loosen, his shoulders relax. He takes another drink of wine.

Alana fixes him with a sharp look. "*Behave*," she hisses.

Will huffs, blowing a wayward curl out of his face. "Would you rather I bare my neck and bat my eyelashes at him?" he demands.

"Stop being difficult," Alana says, more exasperated than scolding. "It wouldn't kill you to play nice with others."

Will sighs, but relents. He runs a hand through his hair, absently tugging on it, and lets go of the wine glass so he can flick the rubber band against his bared wrist. Margot's eyes drop to the motion and she frowns, seeing the scar and the new welt forming.

"Sorry," Will says. "I'll be good."

"Thank you," Alana replies, with a finality that hides her reaction to Will's sarcasm.

Will knows what he's doing; it's always been a defense mechanism of his to deflect and get defensive when he's uncomfortable. And he is, right now, supremely uncomfortable.

But, a voice whispers in the back of his head that sounds a lot like Abigail, *you don't have to be*.

He frowns to himself, snapping the band again. Shadow Man knows who Will is. Hannibal knows exactly who and what Will is to him, but Will has been granted the opportunity of a lifetime.

Namely, that Hannibal doesn't know *Will* knows who he is.

He is, for the first time in his life, the one who knows more, the one who can see more. He has the power to really make or break this entire situation. He can control how this night goes – he can weaponize his love, trip acid and praise from his tongue in equal measure to see how Hannibal reacts. He *can* bare his throat if he wants, and see if Hannibal's mouth twitches with the urge to bite. He can taunt Hannibal with half-truths, hints that he might know. He can unravel Hannibal from the edges like fine-spun silk.

Hannibal is a spider, and Will has been well-fed and cared for in his web, but now he's big, and strong, and the web is just as much his home as the spider's now. He knows all its tricks, and Hannibal might have been watching Will, he might have known him since he was a child and molded and groomed him into what he is now, but his control ended the moment Will found out his identity, and Hannibal doesn't *know* he knows.

Which means the ball is in Will's court, and it's his turn to serve.

Hannibal returns to the dining room with a large serving tray. The scent of the pork wafts in with him, covering up the Alpha's natural scent. Ink and old books, none of that musky cologne he wore to Will's house. He's hiding in plain sight, now.

There are already plates and silverware set out, and Hannibal takes a large cutting knife and begins to serve out large cuts of the meat, along with the roast potatoes, carrots, and parsnips sitting in the broth around the meat. It really does smell amazing, and Will could definitely get used to eating this well when the walls come down and there's nothing left between them but time and potential.

He sits when everyone is served, and raises his glass in a toast. "To new friendships," he says, and Will raises his glass as well. Alana and Margot follow suit, they all drink, and begin to eat.

The food is...fantastic. There's really no other word for it. Will swallows his first bite and almost chokes with how good it tastes. He sees Hannibal smile out of the corner of his eye.

"So, Will," Alana says after a moment of companionable silence, "when can I come see the new house?"

"I got a call from my contractor today. He says they should be finished with the big repairs by next week. So then it's just basic T.L.C. I need to get a new carpet in there, a fresh coat of paint, it'll be good as new."

"Awesome," Alana says, smiling. "How are the dogs settling in?"

"Like they've been there all their life."

"You have dogs?" Margot asks.

Will nods. "Two, right now," he replies. "I had more, but put them up for adoption when I moved. I didn't really have the space to bring them all."

"Is someone watching them?" Alana asks.

Will nods. "There's an Omega in town that I knew when I was younger. He's taking care of them for me."

Beside him, he sees a slight hesitation as Hannibal cuts into his next bite of food. It's small, hardly noticeable, except he's keeping careful watch over everything Hannibal does, so he notices. He fights back his smile.

Margot tilts her head to one side. "I'm confused," she says. "Is this place your home town?"

Will shakes his head. "I spent a summer there once, when I was eight," he replies. "I made friends."

"And now you've returned to that place, in the house that bears the memory of a terrible crime," Hannibal notes. Will presses his lips together and meets his eyes. He can't hold them, though – he's sure if he does for too long, he'll show his hand, and he doesn't want to do that yet. "Are you welcomed, there?"

"Small town folk are nice enough," Will replies. "They like to see the potential in people."

Hannibal's knife hesitates again. His fingers tighten, and he sets it down, taking a drink of wine. Will smiles into his own glass. He takes a drink, sets it down, and runs his hand over the side of his neck, across his nape, making sure his fingers catch the collar of his shirt and tug at it.

He thinks he might hear, very quietly, Hannibal growl.

"I'm glad you have a friendly face there," Alana says with a warm, affectionate smile. Will returns it, taking up his knife and fork again and slicing a piece of potato. "It's been boring without you. All I hear at work is Jack ranting at me about calling you and begging you to come back."

Will huffs, rolling his eyes.

Hannibal smiles. "I've received the same," he says, and Will blinks, frowning at him. "Jack seemed convinced it was the suggestion for my therapy that was the last straw."

"Well," Will replies coolly, "he isn't wrong."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, his smile widening enough to show his teeth. Will's eyes drop to them and he presses his lips together, his spine growing hot. Hannibal is regaining his confidence, his control. Will can't let him keep it.

"You don't like people asking you the difficult questions."

"Questions are only difficult when you refuse to see the answer," Will replies. "I've never shied away from a puzzle, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal's eyes flash, his smile turning pleased and proud at the corners. Will can't control his blush, he knows it's just a physical reaction to a pretty Alpha smiling at him, but he hates it all the same. He averts his eyes and realizes too late that it's another show of weakness.

"You still teach though, right?" Margot asks.

Will nods. "I profiled for the FBI, before I left," he tells her. "Jack didn't like me quitting that part."

"Well, that's hardly fair," she says with a huff. "You should be allowed to do as you please."

"I quite agree," Hannibal says. "Personal freedom is so often taken for granted. Without it, the fires inside all of us, the things that give us passion and drive, are reduced to mere embers."

Will's jaw clenches. It's bait – he knows it, Hannibal knows it. A dangling thread of truth hanging between them that Will could catch, if he wanted to be yanked out of the water.

But Hannibal is not a fisherman, he's a hunter. Will is better at this part than he will ever be.

"Fires are dangerous, Doctor Lecter," he says quietly, skirting his eyes to the side to watch Hannibal's hands. "When left unattended, they grow and devour all in their path."

Hannibal hums. "So you would rather see it tamped out altogether?"

"Control is necessary, if destruction is the alternative," Will says.

"And yet you resent others' control over you."

Will's shoulders tense, hard enough that his injured one burns sharply in complaint. He hisses, rolling it to try and work out the knot of tension, and runs his hand through his hair.

"Do you ever turn off the need to psychoanalyze people?" he says harshly.

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "Do you?"

Will rolls his eyes, and reaches for his wine again. Margot clears her throat, her eyes darting between Will and Hannibal like she's watching two fighting dogs circling each other in the ring, waiting for the moment to strike.

But Alana is smiling. She knows Will likes poking at people. It's a sign of affection. He meets her eyes and she winks at him, before turning her attention back to her food.

"So, Margot," Will says, setting his glass back down once the wine is sitting thickly on his tongue. He turns his wrist, rubbing the rubber band against the table until it burns across the welt there. "How did you and Alana meet? She won't tell me."

"You never asked!" Alana says.

"And would you have told me, if I did?"

She grins at him, lopsided and playful. "I thought you liked puzzles."

Margot laughs, resting her hand on Alana's over the table for a brief moment. "I was hosting an event to raise money for scholarships at the university," she says. "I met Alana there."

"Did your eyes lock across a crowded room?" Will teases. Alana definitely looks like she'd kick him if she could. "Did time stop?"

Margot grins, cherubic, her eyes bright. "Do you believe in such things, Will?"

Will smiles, and shrugs. "I suppose it's possible," he replies. "But I'd chalk it up to chemicals, honestly. We don't control our attraction any more than we control the body we're born with. Those kinds of decisions come after."

"Decisions?" Margot asks, tilting her head to one side.

Will nods. "After that first moment, when your eyes lock, and you see the other person in the room, you decide in that moment to approach them. From there, you choose how you present yourself; a socialite," he says, nodding to Margot, "a psychiatrist," he adds, looking to Alana, "or something else entirely."

He looks at Hannibal, meets the Alpha's eyes, and then away. He can tell he has Hannibal's complete attention. It feels like warmth, and need. Sitting as close to Hannibal as he is, he can catch Hannibal's scent – it's crisp, as controlled as the rest of him. Will wonders if he's wearing scent-deadening cologne to hide how overjoyed he is to be with Will in this moment. Will didn't think that far ahead, and he isn't sure just how much his scent is giving him away, and wonders if Hannibal will assume it's because he's with Alana.

After all, Hannibal doesn't know he knows.

"After that, you decide if you're going to pursue that person," he continues. "The chase, the hunt. It's all a product of your own sense of control, your desires – both the ones you would see realized, and the ones you wouldn't."

Margot smiles. "You speak like an Alpha," she says gently. "All this talk of chasing and hunting."

"It's one of the first instincts we are born with," Hannibal replies mildly.

Alana laughs. "Maybe you men are," she says with another playful smile.

Will huffs. "It's true," he concedes. "Women are much more controlled. They have that luxury."

"How do you mean?" Margot asks, frowning.

"I mean, the way Omegas and Alphas are born, and socialized...and groomed." He hesitates on the word, feels Hannibal's eyes on him, sees his jaw clench. "We have Voices, and mating urges that women don't suffer from. Omegas can make sounds only Alphas can hear, and vice versa. We are much closer to animals than you are – women are the next stage of evolution in the species."

Alana laughs. "You've been spending too much time in lectures," she says fondly.

Will shrugs. "Maybe."

"Do you believe that Alphas and Omegas are so unrefined?" Hannibal asks, his tone mild and polite. Will looks at him and fights the urge to cover his neck. He remembers the sketch Shadow Man sent him, on his twenty-first birthday, where he was posed much like this, with a mating scar on his neck standing out stark and rich.

Will smiles. "I think people like you and me are a fire, Doctor Lecter," he replies quietly. Hannibal's mouth twitches and suddenly all Will can think about is how those lips felt against his own. He swallows, shivering at the heat in Hannibal's eyes.

He has to maintain control.

The conversation ends, and they finish their meal. They talk about other things – how Alana's classes are going. She's thinking about getting a second degree in criminology, and Will playfully suggests that she can use his papers if she wants. Margot tells them that she was born and raised in Maryland, and lives in her family estate. She's an avid horse rider and breeder, preferring those animals to the pigs her brother tends, and when the meal is over, Hannibal invites them to the study for a nightcap, and Will's heart almost stops when he sees a harpsichord in the corner of the room.

Hannibal excuses himself when their glasses are filled to clear away the dishes, and as soon as he's out of the room, Alana sits forward, her eyes gleaming and her smile wide.

"So?" she asks.

Will huffs, and pretends he doesn't know exactly what she's talking about. "So?" he repeats, childish, petulant.

"Don't be like that," Alana says. "What do you think of him, now that he's not trying to drill into your grey matter?"

Will sighs, leaning back on the two-seater couch he'd claimed for himself. The study is luxurious, the books on the shelves probably cost more than his old house and new house combined, the furniture more than his student loans.

"Don't really know what you want me to say, here," he replies.

"You're an asshole," she huffs, sitting back. Will grins at her. "It's a good thing you're pretty otherwise I wouldn't put up with you."

"Aesthetic charm *is* how I got by my whole life," he concedes with an overly-solemn nod. She rolls her eyes, and kicks him with the toe of her shoe. "Ow!"

"Don't test me," she says smugly, taking a sip of port. Will does the same. It's sweet and delicious.

Hannibal returns to the study, his own glass in hand, and smiles at all of them. He takes a seat by Will, not on the couch but on the chair next to it, and settles down with a contented sigh. Will is more than a little buzzed at his point, relaxed like one does after easing into something painful. He's been in Hannibal's presence long enough to know that he's not going to lose his shit at the drop of a hat.

He looks to Hannibal and smiles. "Thanks for dinner," he says. "It was delicious."

Hannibal smiles back. "Cooking has always been a pleasure of mine," he replies. "I've been practicing the art since I was very young."

"Praise well-deserved, then."

Alana smiles at the two of them, preening with pleasure as she watches them interact. Margot is sitting next to her, her cheeks flushed and her eyelids drooping. Will can't imagine she's much a heavyweight, given how slight she is.

Even as he thinks it, Alana looks to Margot and smiles fondly, reaching out to gently pet over her flushed cheek. "I think we should head out," she says, standing and pulling Margot to her feet.

Will and Hannibal stand as well. "Are you alright to drive?" Hannibal asks, and Alana smiles.

"It'll take more than some fancy wine to knock me out," she replies.

Hannibal laughs. "Let me walk you out," he says. Will comes forward and kisses Alana on the cheek, and huffs a surprised laugh when Margot pulls him into a hug. He embraces her gently, mindful of how unsteady she is, and lets her go, depositing her into Alana's arms.

Hannibal leads the way out of the study, and the women follow. Will doesn't.

He sits back down, and thinks about his next move.

This is it. He's finally going to be alone with Shadow Man. After all these years, all the longing and the imposed patience, he can finally get what he wants – what he's dreamed about since he was old enough to understand things like desire and love.

He could stay. He could stay and never leave again. Shadow Man promised he wouldn't trick him, wouldn't turn him away, and Will knows he won't.

But.

If he succumbs now, if he gives in to his own fire and lets himself burn, this is all he will ever be. A child, fashioned into the perfect mate for the killer no one can catch. His belly is full of Hannibal's food, his mind burning with his letters, his love. They are still on uneven ground, unsure footing.

If they are to be together, to be perfectly united and equal in all things, Will cannot let himself burn. Not yet.

He stands, and goes to the harpsichord. His fingers trail absently along the keys, pressing down on one, then two above it, then two above that in a major chord.

He looks up when Hannibal's shadow darkens the doorway. He wears his control and confidence like a person suit, hiding behind refinement and pretty words. But Will sees – he sees because he knows what to look for. Because Shadow Man told him to learn.

He sees desire, anticipation. He can already feel Hannibal's hands on him, remembers the gentle touch of knuckles on his cheeks, teeth at his neck. His heart is hammering, and his hands start to shake.

He pulls his fingers from the keys and steps away, nodding to it. "Do you play?"

"Yes," Hannibal replies, stepping into the room. Will feels like he's being hunted, but he's not prey. He never was. "And compose."

Will smiles. "Will you play something for me?"

Hannibal knows what he's asking. Shadow Man promised to play for him, when they were together. The other Alpha nods, stoic as an executioner, and goes to the bench seat. Will sits back on the couch, his eyes on Hannibal as he straightens up, in position, and starts to play. There's no sheet music – this melody is as old as they are.

He closes his eyes as Hannibal starts. The music starts off slow – major key, tentative. A child crawling through brush to an old letterbox in the woods with his friend. A high note, the first spark of interest. A riddle, and an answer. Will wonders who Hannibal left it for in the first place, or if it was always just for him.

The melody quickens, and with it, Will's heart beats faster. He lowers his head, sets his empty port glass down and wraps his fingers in the rubber band around his wrist. He snaps it against the welt, hissing when the key changes, turns minor, longing. Notes stretch out for eternities, each moment like an era and a day between one and the next. The years Will was missing, gone in Louisiana and out of Hannibal's radar.

Then, an explosion of joy. It hits Will hard enough that he gasps, wrapping his fingers in his hair and tugging. Each brush of sound in his head feels like hands on his back, circling his nape, nails on his jaw. His breath catches, because the joy doesn't end. It softens, grows spines, assaults him again. Each new letter, each new year, another chord joins its sisters as Hannibal plays and the music is absolutely beautiful, ruinous, weaponized, brutal in how happy and how utterly full of adoration it is.

He hadn't expected it. He's not prepared – nothing could have prepared him to hear just how much, how ardently, how without limit Hannibal loves him.

The music slows, the notes fade away, and Will's eyes are wet when he lifts his head.

Hannibal is staring at his hands, and then he looks up, meets Will's eyes. "It's not complete, yet," he says.

"Do you have an ending?" Will replies, breathless.

Hannibal shakes his head. "I hope to," he says. "Soon."

"It's beautiful," Will whispers. Hannibal blinks, the edges of his mouth soften. He turns and sits forward, elbows on his knees, meeting Will's gaze without flinching. Will feels like he's trying to shout the truth to him across their space, across time, back to when Will was fourteen years old and first started to fall in love, or maybe further still, to when he was eight, when this all began.

Hannibal smiles. "I'm glad you like it."

"Whoever you wrote that for, whoever inspired it, I hope they know how loved they are."

Hannibal's smile fades, replaced by a careful mask. "I think he does," he says, softly. "I hope he does."

Will presses his lips together. He could stay. He could confess.

But he won't. It's all about pride, and Will's is too strong to succumb so easily. Hannibal molded him into what he is, and now it's Will's turn.

If Hannibal wants a chase, well, he can chase Will. Will is done running, and will be waiting for him.

He stands. "I should go," he says.

Hannibal swallows, and nods. "Let me walk you out," he replies. Will nods, and allows Hannibal's shadow to follow him to the front door. He takes his coat and shrugs it on, hands in his pockets, and turns to meet Hannibal's dark eyes.

The longing there spears him in place. It's cruelty of the harshest kind, but it's only fair – Shadow Man came to him, and left him wanting and desperate. Now it's Will's turn to repay him. An eye for an eye, blood for blood.

"Doctor Lecter," he says, and Hannibal's eyes sharpen, he straightens up, armored and ready for the lance to his heart. Will's aim has to be perfect. "When we first met, you told me that I needed a way out of the dark places I go to, at Jack's command."

Hannibal swallows, and nods.

"I don't think I want a way out. I think I'm most at home, in the shadows."

"That sounds very lonely, Will," Hannibal says softly. His fingers are flexing at his sides, like he wants to reach out and touch, but he won't until Will admits he knows.

He smiles. "There's a difference between being alone and being lonely," he replies. Hannibal's eyes darken, his mouth twitches at the corner like he wants to growl. They're standing very close together, Will could lean in and put his nose to Hannibal's neck if he wanted to. "Do you think I'm lonely, Doctor Lecter?"

"Only because you choose to be," Hannibal says. He hesitates, then; "But you don't have to be."

Will's smile widens. He feels savage, now. He has never felt more powerful than he does in this moment, with the love of his life standing so desperate and wanting before him. It's a feeling Will knows intimately, and as much as he wants to give in, to stop fighting, to confess, this will be important in the years to come.

"Thank you again for dinner," he says. Hannibal's shoulders drop, defeated down to his soul, and Will presses his lips together and tries to ignore the soft whine that wants to escape his throat. "I'll remember this night fondly."

"Don't be a stranger," Hannibal replies.

Will smiles. "I won't if you won't," he says quietly, and then he turns and leaves. He doesn't look back, can't allow himself that moment of weakness. He hears the door close behind him and the cold, dark night air wraps around his shoulders, pulling him under and driving him to his car.

He goes to his hotel room, packs up his bags, and checks out. Then, when he's sure the coast is clear, he drives back to Hannibal's neighborhood.

He takes a piece of paper, and his pen, and presses the paper carefully against his steering wheel so he can write;

"You're not a stranger anymore, Shadow Man.

You know where to find me."

He gets out of the car, prowls to the front door, and carefully wraps the rubber band from around his wrist over the paper, affixing it to the doorknob. Then, he goes back to his car, gets in, and starts the drive back to Harrogate.

Their place is finally ready. Now all Will can do is wait.

But he's good at waiting. He's had a lot of practice.

Chapter End Notes

let's be real the final reveal and consummation deserves a chapter all its own, y/y? I hope you guys liked it :D

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

It is 2 in the morning my dudes and this took six hours but YOU KNOW WHAT? I'm happy with it!

I'm going out of town this weekend and I Needed to finish this because frankly it's been consuming my heart. I hope you guys like the final chapter!

Will knows, realistically, that Hannibal probably won't get his note until morning. He makes it back to Harrogate just after midnight and drives to his house, parks his car and turns it off, and stares at the dark windows, the gaping maw of the brown door. In the darkness he can't see much else, but he recognizes that the roof looks to be in much better repair, the gutters have been replaced too, he notes. The siding is fixed and looks pristine, an off-white to match the original color.

He sighs, flattening his hands on the steering wheel, knuckles turning white around the edges.

He could drive back. If Hannibal is buzzing with half as much excitement and emotion as Will is, he won't be asleep. He could go back, beg for forgiveness, offer his neck and his body and his heart to the man who has claimed all three in equal measure, in their entirety.

He could do it.

But he shouldn't.

This is important. Shadow Man has called the shots, relied on Will's obedience to the rules and respect of his puzzles so that Will never felt the urge to run the letters for fingerprints, never needed to set up cameras or stay on watch all day and night outside his house or his dorm to see if any cars looked familiar, any faces kept showing up in his life that might have been the Alpha writing to him all these years.

Shadow Man has only come to Will once, because Will begged him to and promised him an answer if he did. Even then, he didn't have to come into Will's house. Will had posted the answer to the riddle of John's murder on his door – he didn't have to come in. He didn't have to see Will, and touch him, and kiss him.

But he did. Because he needed to. Because he loves Will and Will is his weakness.

So, too, Will must trust that Shadow Man will come to him again.

It's late and Will is tired, but too energized to sleep. He's not sure he'll ever sleep again.

He takes his laptop out from the bag in the passenger seat, pleased when he can connect to his Wi-Fi even outside his house, and pulls up a Google search for Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

He finds articles about Hannibal's internship at Johns Hopkins. He finds a newspaper report about Hannibal when he was a surgeon in Baltimore, how his 'daring' attempt at reversing the damage to a quadriplegic patient had given the man the use of his arms back. He finds papers published under Hannibal's name about abnormal psychology in relation to anti-social grooming in Alphas under single-parent households.

He huffs at that, and wonders how much of this research is based off of observing Will. But Will wouldn't call his view of the world abnormal – and definitely not the fault of living with his father, or his uncle. Chris' mother had filed for divorce before Will moved to live with them and Will is sure that his uncle's overprotectiveness when Will was assumed to present Omega was a big result of that stressor.

There's a blank spot in the Maryland reports during the time Will was younger, from eleven to eighteen, when he'd come back to Maryland for university. Will is sure Hannibal found work in Louisiana, but kept a low profile while he was there.

Then, Hannibal's practice had opened just after Will turned twenty. From surgeon to psychiatrist. He doesn't seem to specialize in anything specific, but Will is sure he likes to take patients that have a darker side than most.

These are all things he knew, absently. Confirming theories, not fighting facts to fit a profile, but receiving validation for what he already believed to be true.

Hannibal is Shadow Man. Of course he is.

He's a killer.

Will should feel something about that. He should be repulsed, revolted, terrified. He should.

But...

In some way, knowing that Shadow Man is a murderer doesn't frighten him. He's not afraid of the man – how can he be, when he knows Shadow Man would never do anything to hurt him? It's about pride, dominance, the chase – these are things Alphas value over all else. Shadow Man has spent years proving that he's a superior mate, not just with gifts and letters and games, but in literally proving himself better than all the most brilliant minds in the FBI, in the BSU. He's the killer no one can catch, unless he lets them.

And he could have kept Will blind. He could have tricked him, and stolen him away when he was a child, and groomed him much more thoroughly so that Will was totally devoted to him not by choice, but through his own control. Will could have stopped writing at any point. He could have moved away and forgotten about Shadow Man entirely. He could have fled the country, taken up gardening, mated an Omega or a woman and had children and lived a happy, well-rounded life.

But he hadn't. He'd chosen to see what Shadow Man wanted him to see. He'd chosen to learn, and to prepare, so that he was ready when the time came. He'd *chosen* this, all of it, and he's not going to back away now.

"We always have a choice." That's what Shadow Man had told him, when Will was a child and the letters had started again. "And when we are too weak and too small, we make ourselves bigger, and stronger, so that it doesn't happen again."

Will is strong, now. He's killed before. He felt the life leave a man's body and wished, in the darker moments between then and now, that it had lasted longer.

Alphas aren't patient. The payoff has to be worth the risk, and the chase.

This is a chase that's gone on for twenty-seven years. Will knows it will be worth it. He can only hope Shadow Man agrees with him.

He doesn't sleep in his house that night, and when dawn is just breaking over the horizon, he starts his car and drives into town. He writes a check and slips it into Harrison's work address with another letter of thanks, and then he goes to the grocery store to stock up on wine.

Then, he goes to the docks.

He hasn't been here for almost thirty years. They look the same, but so much smaller. Of course, the eyes of an eight-year-old see everything as big and bright. The docks themselves take up no more space than two city blocks, and the air reeks of fish and diesel from the boats. Men are bringing in their hauls while the tide is high, buckets and nets of fish are being unloaded and moved to the vendors, trades are being made for more rope and fishing line.

He stops when he sees a woman sitting behind one such stall, buckets of oysters, clams, and mussels in front of her. It's Molly. She meets Will's eyes as he approaches and gives him a tight smile. "Morning, Agent Graham," she says.

"Please," he replies, "Will is just fine."

She presses her lips together. She's wearing jeans and a heavy coat, one leg crossed over the other, her phone held idly in her hand. She sits forward and rests her elbows on her knees. "Did you figure out who killed my dad?" she asks.

Will sighs, and nods. "I did," he says. She blinks at him, surprised, and straightens up. "He's killed a lot of people. Police arrested him five years ago for a parking violation and his DNA matched the foreign presence at John's murder scene. He's serving life in prison."

She blows out a heavy breath, her eyes getting wet at the corners. "Wow," she says, and looks away, biting her lower lip. "A parking ticket, huh?"

"Happens a lot, actually," Will says. "There have been a fair few serial killers and crime lords that they get on other charges."

"I can't believe..." She swallows, rubbing her free hand across her neck. "I can't believe they got him. That I finally know."

"I'm just sorry it took so long to get closure."

"Late closure is better than none," she says, and meets his eyes again. Will doesn't even feel bad for lying to her. His moral compass has long been set off kilter, like a clock where all the numbers are in one corner and the hands spin without direction. "Thank you. Knowing he's in prison and not still out there.... There aren't words."

Will manages a small smile, and then clears his throat, looking down at the buckets of shellfish. "Could I get some oysters from you?" he asks.

"Sure," she says, and stands with a bright smile. How easily animosity and suspicion melts away when given good news. People in this town are so trusting. "How much do you want?"

Will bites his lower lip and looks down at the buckets. They've been half-shelled already, their grey and pink innards exposed to the salty air. "Just a pound," he replies, and she nods, grabs a thin plastic bag like they use in grocery stores for fish and fruit, and starts to scoop them in. She places them on a scale, takes two out, until the scale reads an even pound. "How much?"

"Nothing," she says, tying the bag off and handing it to him. He blinks, and frowns at her. "You solved my father's murder. It's the least I can do."

"I couldn't -."

"Will," Molly says, a fond and exasperated smile on her face. She holds the bag out to him again. "Just take them."

"Thank you," he says, relenting, and puts his wallet away, taking the bag. "When will someone be home, so I can get my dogs?"

"My mom goes to the park every morning. You should be able to catch him there. If not, any time in the afternoon is fine. I'm there past one, and I only leave to get Wally from school."

"Thank you, Molly," Will says with a smile. "I appreciate it."

"Really, the pleasure's all mine. You have no idea what kind of peace you've brought our family. Let us know if there's anything you need."

Will nods, ducking his head. Her gratitude makes him feel itchy – even though it's true, he knows who killed John, and even though he's not expressly wrong in telling her that the man who did it is no longer a threat, it's still a lie, and her happiness feels undeserved.

He gives her another nod and turns away from the stall, heading back to his car.

When he gets back to his house, that's when he notices.

There are significantly more tire tracks than from his own vehicle and Harrison's truck.

Frowning, he gets out of the car, bottles of wine in a bag in one hand, the oysters in the other. He fishes the key awkwardly out of the mailbox, almost dropping the oysters as he does, and heads inside. The door looks like it's been freshly painted.

When he opens the door, the scents of sanded wood, paint, and air freshener assaults his nose, and he gasps.

His house looks...*welcoming*.

The shredded carpet leading to the kitchen has been removed, the floor sanded and waxed to reveal the dark hardwood underneath. The living room has been painted with the paint Will bought from the hardware store his first few days here. The tarps have been removed, the boxes and furniture unpacked and placed. There's a shelf in the corner of the living room with his books, three chairs – a new one bought, he notices, that doesn't quite match the others but looks close enough – packed around the table in the dining room.

He sets the wine on the kitchen counter and puts the oysters in the fridge.

He goes back into the dining room and sees a huge tray of cookies and a card. It's not from Shadow Man – he doesn't recognize the writing on the front, addressing the card to 'Will'. He takes it and slides the card out. It's a bright, flowery design, the words 'Welcome to your new home' in gold across the front.

He opens it. Unbidden, a smile comes to his face. "We thought you could use some help getting settled. Hope to see you at the social on Monday! – Deborah and Malcolm". They must have done all this while he was away.

Two days – they must have had help, too. Will can barely believe it.

Small townsfolk are so *weird*.

They've brought in his couch, his chairs, his boxes aren't piled on top of each other on the wall anymore, but unpacked. Will suspects he'll find his dishes and silverware placed with utmost care in appropriate drawers and cabinets.

He goes upstairs and to the guest bedroom, where he'd been sleeping. His mattress and sheets and sleeping bag have been removed. He sighs, and goes to the master bedroom. His bed has been set up, as well as a second couch that he has never owned in his life, and wonders if he's destined to be one of those cases where people crowdsource for furniture for a poor citizen in their town, and all the people come together to clean and organize their home since they can't do it themselves.

He doesn't want to be a charity case, but he appreciates the sentiment all the same.

She doesn't come to him, doesn't manifest to tell him that he should be grateful, that he should go visit Malcolm and Deborah and let them know how much their hard work is appreciated. He already knows, of course, but he likes to argue with himself too.

But she doesn't come. There's no room for her in Will's heart anymore.

He goes back downstairs, peels back the Clingfilm and eats a cookie. It's chocolate chip, sweet and crunchy, and he gives a hum of appreciation, wrapping the tray back up and sticking it in the fridge. Chocolate is always better cold.

"Well," he tells the open air, "at least he won't walk into a disaster area."

"Shadow Man, I want to run away."

"Where would you run, my darling?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why I want to run."

"You stand on the brink of a great accomplishment, my daydreamer. Days from now, you will graduate and move onto the next stage of your life. You have proven yourself time and again to your teachers, your classmates, and your peers."

"I feel like I'm living a lie."

"What lie?"

"My friend tells me I should get out more. I should date. She wants to go with me and a group of others to a cabin for the break. I find that idea...uncomfortable."

"Do you not want to celebrate your achievements?"

"They don't feel like achievements. To achieve a goal means that there were struggles. Obstacles. I suffer from neither."

"There is a study that hypothesizes the existence of a 'wanderlust gene'. It is something embedded into your biological makeup, compelling you to always be moving, to continue to explore. But you have never wandered, my daydreamer."

"Why would I? Where I am is where you are."

"I often wonder what might have happened if I was a weaker man. If I had come to you when your father died, or when you started college. Even now, the thought of seeing you graduate, of your eyes potentially meeting mine with no recognition, fills me with a longing I cannot describe."

"Then I guess that makes me weak, because it's all I want."

"One day, my daydreamer. I swear on my life."

Will drives to Elijah's house in the afternoon after a fitful attempt at sleep. Elijah is out in the front yard, playing with his dog and Will's two. They stop when he pulls up and Winston and Addy give a bark of greeting, rushing to him when he gets out of the car.

Will smiles, kneeling down to pet them as they fall over each other against his chest. He laughs, suddenly feeling more at home with the animals under his hands, and looks up when Elijah approaches, his own dog trotting placidly at his side.

"Hey, Will," he greets warmly, and reaches out to grab Will's forearm and help him to his feet. Winston jumps up and Will tuts at him, pushing him back down but keeping his hand low so he can keep petting Winston, and Addy when she pushes him away for her turn. "Molly called me. She said you found the guy who..." He clears his throat, ducks his eyes down.

"I did," Will says quietly. Elijah meets his eyes, wide and that same pretty golden-blue.

He smiles, off-kilter and gentle. "Would you like to come in? I was about to make lunch."

Will swallows. As crazy as it sounds, the idea of eating Elijah's food puts him ill at ease. Of being in his home, surrounded by his scent and that of his family – no, Will couldn't. He won't have Shadow Man smelling anyone on him when he comes.

"Thanks, but I should be getting back to the house," he replies.

Elijah nods, understanding sitting heavy on his face. "Well, thank you again, and if you need a dog sitter you know where to find me."

"I appreciate it, thank you," Will replies, and clucks his tongue. "C'mon." Winston and Addy follow him back to the car and he opens the backseat to let them clamber inside. When he turns, Elijah hasn't moved, and he lifts his hand in a little wave that Elijah returns, before Will gets into his car and drives away.

When he gets back to the house, nothing has changed. Will feeds the dogs and lets them into the backyard, dumps his clothes into the washing machine, and eats another cookie. Shadow Man doesn't come.

Will opens all the windows to get rid of the scent of air freshener. He keeps the dogs outside as much as they want to be, leaves their beds by the fireplace, and when night comes he calls

them inside, locks the back door but not the front, and goes upstairs to the master bedroom.

His bed has been made, his clothes unpacked into his closet and a chest of drawers. Everything in its place, nothing left behind. Even the few framed photographs he's kept over the years have been set on top of his chest of drawers – the picture of his father that his uncle had given him when he'd died, the two brothers standing in front of a fishing boat, hardly older than sixteen themselves. The picture of Chris and his high school prom date – now wife – with their newborn that they'd sent one Christmas along with the bottle of aftershave with the ship on the bottle they give Will every year. Alana's and his graduation photo, and a picture of all his dogs Alana had taken the one and only time she'd gotten them all to sit still.

The master bathroom is a warmly-colored affair, with peach tiles around the bath and a large mirror covering the opposite wall above the counter. Will took his toiletries with him when he went to Baltimore, and he unpacks them now, sets his toothbrush in a little cup and puts his shampoo and body wash on the edges of the tub. It's so domestic, as close to a nesting instinct as he can muster, but it still feels plastic and shallow.

This isn't a home. Not yet. Will isn't sure it ever will be.

At a loss of anything left to do, and with the hour so late, Will dresses for bed and slides into place on his bed. It's only a mattress on a box spring, no headboard or wood to creak with his weight. Will wonders, absently, what Hannibal's bedroom looks like.

It's probably opulent, *lavish*, with thread counts higher than Will's ever heard of, art on the walls that are both tasteful and artistic. He might have a sketchbook, tucked into place at a small table by the window, where he'd look out into the dark street and imagine Will coming through the door, exhausted and spent.

He remembers how he was, back in school. If he'd been living with Hannibal at the time, mated to the older Alpha, he'd come home to a well-cooked meal and a glass of wine. Hannibal would know to leave him alone, let him decompress from the images of murder and mayhem that so many of their kind commit. Then, when Will was ready, he'd come upstairs and collapse on the bed, still dressed. Hannibal would smile, stand and close his book or journal or whatever he was doing, run gentle hands down Will's calves, scoop his feet free of his shoes, undress him with the utmost care.

Will shivers, rolling onto his side as he imagines Hannibal's big hands flattening across his stomach, catching the buckle of his belt and pulling it free. He'd lift his hips, lazy and exhausted, just mobile enough to be helpful as Hannibal unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans or slacks, peeling them down to reveal his pale thighs. He'd take Will's socks off at the same time, ball them up and toss them into the hamper without looking.

He'd fold Will's slacks and place them to one side if they were clean enough to wear again.

He wouldn't touch Will's shirt. Will would be present enough to lift his hips but not move his arms. Instead, he'd flatten himself over Will's back, purring just loud enough to get Will to close his eyes, content and trusting under his mate's heat and weight. He'd nuzzle Will's hair, kiss his neck, and pull the covers over both of them so that Will was cocooned and soothed in the darkness.

He closes his eyes, biting his lower lip, and digs his nails into his nape, imagining it's Hannibal's teeth. He digs hard enough to sting. When sleep finally does take him, he hears Hannibal's music in his head.

Shadow Man doesn't come for him that night, either.

"You ended up going to the cabin."

"Yes. There was no reason not to."

"No excuse, you mean."

"I guess. A lot of people do things without an excuse, Shadow Man."

"I suppose that's true. But is it also not fair to say that people do things for reasons that only make sense to them?"

"I'm getting tired of having this argument."

"I know you are, my daydreamer. I know."

Will wakes to his phone ringing. He groans, rolls over, and answers it blindly. "Hello?" he grunts.

"Will, what the Hell?"

It's Alana. Will rubs his hands over his eyes and sighs. His throat is stinging and his shoulder aches. He sits up, disappointed down to his bones to see that there are no new bruises on his thighs, no dip or suggestion of warmth in the other half of his bed. Shadow Man never came.

"Hey. Sorry. What?"

Alana huffs. "You just disappeared out of nowhere and all you give me is 'Sorry'?" she demands. "What the Hell happened?"

"I came home," Will says, frowning. "The lecture was over. There wasn't any reason to stay."

She pauses, and then says something Will didn't expect; "Did Hannibal do something?"

Will blinks, and swallows, trying to control his voice. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...Margot and I leave, and then you just pack up and run away. He didn't *do* something, did he?"

"What? No?" Will replies, blanching at the idea. It's laughable, almost – that Hannibal or Shadow Man would do something Will didn't want. "No, I just didn't feel like paying for my room for another night, and there were still repairs and stuff I wanted to oversee. Nothing happened."

"Okay. Good," she says, with a conviction that threatened violence had Will replied any other way. Will smiles, warm in his chest at her protectiveness. "I just wanted to call you and make sure everything was okay. You're sure you're alright?"

"Of course," Will replies. "I'm sorry for worrying you, really. You know how I get."

"I know," she says, quietly. "That's why I was worried."

He sighs, and gets up, shrugging off his clothes and leaving them in a pile as he heads to the bathroom. "Well, since you woke me, I guess I'll get started with my day. Thanks for that."

"What are friends for?" she replies, smug and laughing. "I'll talk to you later. Bye!"

"Bye," Will says, and hangs up, setting his phone down. He steps into the tub and draws the curtain, turns the water on and when it's warm enough, pulls the lever that prompts the shower to start. The hot water beats down on his shoulders and head and he sighs, closing his eyes, and sets about getting clean. This is a respectable house now, and it would do well to keep up the appearance as much as he's able.

"Do you believe in God, Shadow Man?" Will asks when he's sixteen and freshly presented, his first day back at school after the day and a half of rutting hormones have cleared out of his system.

"I believe there is one, yes. The design of the world is too intelligent otherwise. I do not, however, think He cares much about what we do."

"Why?"

"If He did, there would be a lot more punishment in the world."

Years from that day, Will would have a conversation about God with Shadow Man, and not know he's Shadow Man, and he'll hear that God is 'Terrific', and say that He's the greatest serial killer the world has ever known.

"Do you think God created Man, to be the punishers for Him?"

"That's an interesting theory, darling."

"My uncle told me a story once. There was a man, and there was a flood. A woman came with a Jeep and offered to get him out, and he refused, saying God would save him. Then a couple in a boat, when the streets became rivers. They offered the same, and he refused,

saying God would save him. Then, when he was on his roof, a chopper came, and they said they would save him, but he refused. Then he died, and when he met God, he asked why no help came, and God told him 'I sent you a car, a boat, and a helicopter, and you refused all three'."

"Learning to recognize the signs and acts of others is an important skill, my daydreamer. It is what I have always encouraged you to do – to recognize patterns and understand motivations. It will make you a great man, someday, to walk into a room and see the potential of all those in it."

"I don't think there is a God, Shadow Man. I think there are just men like you, who play Him."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Important. God only shows Himself to men who would do great things."

"Very good, my daydreamer. That is a belief you and I share. Hold to that."

Sunday passes. Will returns the lawnmower and moves the tray of cookies to a Tupperware container of his own, so he can bring that back, too. He goes during Mass so that he knows Malcolm and Deborah won't be there. He leaves a note of thanks and returns to his home.

Then, he goes to the letterbox.

There are no new riddles inside. Why would there be? Shadow Man knows where he lives now, knows how to come to him directly.

"Strange," Will murmurs to himself, his fingers lightly tracing the 'Will, Look Up' carved into the tree. He wishes she was there with him, so he had someone to talk to. He wonders if there ever *was* a house here. Letterboxes don't just exist for no reason. Perhaps there was, at some point, an old woman living in the woods that people thought was a witch. Maybe the house was torn down when she died.

Maybe Shadow Man killed her.

Nature is quick to reclaim lost land. Had the lot Will purchased not been maintained somewhat, the forest would have quickly overtaken the entire place, devoured the house and all the dark memories inside of it. He thinks about salting the Earth so that, no matter where he ends up, nothing will grow here.

He thinks about what might have happened if John had never shown him this letterbox. If some other child had found the riddle instead – if they'd been a little stronger, or more open to their parents. If his uncle had successfully managed to intercept Shadow Man's letters until his place in Will's heart was similarly overgrown and forgotten.

He doesn't like that thought at all, and discards it as soon as it grows teeth.

Shadow Man doesn't come on Sunday night, nor Monday, nor Tuesday, and Will starts to get angry. How *dare* he – Will knows now, he fucking *knows* and he said as much, and Hannibal played their song for him, and he knows where Will lives. How can he stay in Baltimore, knowing that his mate is sitting here in this Godforsaken place, waiting for him?

He doesn't go back. His pride will not allow it. This is the final part of the hunt, where the prey is injured, and one must approach carefully or risk ruining the meat as it struggles and tries to flee. The moment a pig is caught, and you must slit its throat quickly, precisely. Hannibal knows, he knows and he's testing Will now, to see who can be the most patient. Will is patient – he's had to be, helplessly, for years and years and Goddamn *years*. Oh, he can wait. He can keep his distance.

But he's angry.

That Friday he goes to the hardware store and buys an axe. His shoulder is already hurting before he goes to the tree. He digs the handle behind the metal of the letterbox, grits his teeth, and rips it from its moorings. It falls to the ground with a dull thud and Will contemplates beating it until it's a flat, lifeless piece of metal.

He doesn't.

He turns his attention to the tree. It's half-dead already, part of the bark ripped free from animals, hollow in places from woodpeckers and squirrels. He grits his teeth, swallows back the pain already throbbing in his shoulder, and swings at the tree at knee height.

He swings without rhythm, without finesse. With each hit, images flash before his eyes. *Swing*. John's Cheshire-cat smile, bleeding and showing his teeth. *Swing*. The growing welts on his wrist from the first riddle he couldn't solve. *Swing*. Elijah's relieved smile when Will told him his lie. *Swing*. The scent of Shadow Man's cologne, masking his scent, the way his touch burned Will's cheeks and slit his mouth. *Swing*. The terror in his uncle's eyes when he'd found Will's letters. *Swing*. The way Hannibal looked at him when Will talked about the chase.

Swing. Alana's sorrow when Will demanded she stop trying to set him up on dates. *Swing*. The elation he'd felt every time he received a new letter. *Swing*. The taste of salted caramel.

He hacks at the tree trunk, through the 'Up' etched into its trunk, until the sweltering humidity has caked him in sweat, it stings his eyes, coats his flanks and his neck. *Swing*. His shoulder is screaming at him, begging him to stop. He wonders if John begged, and swings again when he realizes he doesn't really care.

Swing. The trunk gives out. He steps back as the tree falls, tilting to his side and falling down with a crash of leaves and the snap of heavy branches. He huffs, swings the axe over his

shoulder, and walks to the end of the tree, right before the branches start.

He keeps swinging. Every letter, every word, every slam of Will's heart when he'd felt love and affection, he drives it into the tree, severs it from its branches one by one. Then, lower down, piece by piece until he has a stack of logs the length of his forearm. He picks each one up, lays it flat, and quarters them. The days have been dry, and the wood will burn.

By the time he's done, he's shaking with exertion and knows his shoulder will be too stiff to move tomorrow, but he doesn't care. The sunset is just approaching when he gathers the tarp from where it had been folded behind his house, drags it to the tree, places the logs inside, and hauls it back to his house.

He goes back for the letterbox, takes his hammer and nails, and nails it to the front door.

He takes half of the logs inside and, after a moment, goes to his suitcase, and fishes out the letters from Shadow Man that he'd saved. He sits down in front of the fireplace, contemplative, his eyes on the dark maw of the fire bed in front of him.

They'd make excellent kindling.

His fingers curl around the first one. "Shadow Man, are you an Alpha?"

He swallows, tasting the salted caramel on his tongue when he reads it. He sets the letters down, goes to his fridge, and pulls out a fresh bottle of Fireball. He goes back and sits down in front of the fireplace.

"Why do you ask, my daydreamer?"

Will clenches his eyes shut, unscrews the bottle cap and takes two long swallows of the liquid. It burns his nose and the backs of his eyes and he gasps, sets it down blindly, and fists his free hand in his hair.

He opens his eyes again and looks at the fireplace.

No. He can't do that.

He wraps the letters up again, places them on a spare part of his shelf, and takes out one of the notebooks he'd kept from his time in university. In it are the notes from Jack Crawford's lecture, the one where Will had spoken out of turn and landed himself a job offer because of it.

His upper lip curls, he bares his teeth, and rips the pages out of the notebook. He goes to his kitchen, takes out a lighter, and dumps the pages in the fireplace.

He pours half of the Fireball over them, for good measure, and lights a corner. The flames take eagerly, burning Will's former life with ready anticipation. They curl up to a bright flame, happy and dancing, and Will wants to laugh at the metaphor. A fire raging and feasting on what scraps of Will's life he doesn't want to keep.

When he's confident the flames will hold, he places some of the tree pieces in a cone around them, hissing at the heat. He adds the rest of the whiskey to the wood, uncaring when the flames die down at first. They blacken the wood and he opens the chimney so the smoke billows out into the night – a smoke signal for his mate, calling him home.

Will sits with his back to the door, a bottle of red wine in front of him. There are two glasses out, and between them, Shadow Man's letters. He touches them but doesn't read them. The room is too dark to see them except the flickering golden light of the fire, warming the place. His dogs are in the kitchen, locked from the rest of the house.

He sighs when he hears the front door open.

It closes, and Will wants to turn and meet Shadow Man's eyes. But he doesn't. He takes another drink of wine, sets his glass down, and leans forward to pour another.

"Never could pronounce that fancy kind you sent me," he tells the air. "I hope this'll do."

One step, then another. Will takes a deep breath and doesn't smell any foreign cologne, nothing but that familiar scent of paper and ink. But under that, he can taste something else – joy. It's thick, coating his tongue like caramel, stings his mouth like salt on an open wound.

He laughs when he realizes – Shadow Man's joy smells like his favorite kind of chocolate.

The wall darkens with his silhouette, a hand comes forward to pull out another chair, and Hannibal Lecter sits down at Will's side.

Will's eyes slant towards him, meeting his gaze. In the firelight, his features are sharp, he's more a predator now than he's ever been. Will swallows and takes another drink of wine, pleased when Hannibal reaches for his own glass. He's wearing another suit, no tie, his collar unbuttoned to show the movement of his neck when he swallows.

They set their glasses down, their eyes meet. Will isn't quite sure what to do with himself.

Then, Hannibal smiles. It's a soft, adoring expression. His fingers curl like he wants to reach out. "I know you've been waiting for a very long time," he says quietly. Will imagines him whispering the words into the nape of his neck and he shivers, thighs and stomach going tight.

"You know," he says, playing with the stem of his glass, "I imagined for so long, what it would be like when we were together." Hannibal tilts his head to one side, sitting lax and refined in his chair, the picture of ease. Will doesn't know how he does it – he feels aware of every muscle, every breath as it comes and goes from his lungs. He thinks if he stopped telling his heart to beat, it would seize up completely. "But those fantasies always came after. Two weeks in, two months in, years in. I never thought about what it would feel like the moment I finally met you."

"In that, we are opposites," Hannibal replies. "Every dream of mine has been of this exact moment."

Will smiles, and swallows. "How does it normally go?"

"It varies wildly," Hannibal says. "Sometimes it is gentle. Other moments, less so."

Will's mouth twitches, and he takes another drink of wine. Hannibal mimics him. "I'm sorry if I don't live up to your expectations."

"My darling, you have far exceeded them in every moment I have known you."

Will's hand trembles so harshly he has to set the wine glass down, lest he break it. He imagines the dark wine touching the letters, staining the paper and ruining the ink, and his heart stutters in his chest. "I didn't know what to do," he says quietly. His throat feels thick, his eyes burning and prickling with red. "So I ran."

Hannibal hums. His smile doesn't change. "Which time?"

"Every time," Will replies. He huffs a strained laugh. "I remember thinking, when I turned in my resignation, that if there was ever anyone who could make me forget Shadow Man, it would have been you." Hannibal's smile widens, showing his teeth. "I should have realized, then. I've never looked at anyone like that before." He meets Hannibal's eyes – he needs to know how much he means that. "Ever."

"And your instinct is to run, when you feel such things?"

"No," Will replies. "Just my priorities. They changed. I had to come back to Shadow Man. To you."

Hannibal presses his lips together. He sits forward and Will tenses, his shoulder aching sharply. But Hannibal merely takes his wine glass again and swallows another mouthful, before he sets it back down.

His eyes spear Will in place when they meet.

"When did you realize?" he asks.

Will smiles. "I saw Alana's invitation," he says, and nods to the letters. "I'd recognize your handwriting anywhere."

"You know who I am," Hannibal says, and Will nods. "What I am." Will nods again. "And you're not afraid?"

"Should I be?" Will asks quietly. But he's not. He never could be.

Hannibal smiles. "No, darling," he says. His fingers curl and Will wants to touch him, *God*, how badly he wants to touch him. He lets go of the wine glass, rests his hand palm-up on the letters. An invitation. "I don't ever want you to be afraid of me."

"I'm not," Will says.

Hannibal smiles. Then, Will's breath catches as he hears the most beautiful sound; Hannibal's purr. It prowls through the dark space between them, seizes him by the throat, bites into the nape of his neck as surely as nails or teeth. His fingers curl into a tight fist and he only loosens his knuckles when Hannibal finally, *finally*, touches his hand.

It's a lightning strike of need, flashing behind Will's eyes. He whines, tries to swallow back the sound, but Hannibal's eyes flash when he hears it.

"You're so beautiful," he says, sighing. Will's fingers loosen just enough for Hannibal's to slide between them, and Will holds tight like he's afraid Hannibal will disappear if he doesn't. "When I saw you on my doorstep, I imagined this is what it would feel like to meet God."

Will swallows, manages a tight laugh. "Do I inspire such awe?"

"Limitless," Hannibal says. "Boundless. Such is my love for you."

"And mine," Will replies, because he can't not. Shadow Man is here, finally, in the flesh, and he smells like Will's favorite sweets and he's warm and strong, capable, a killer, and Will loves him.

"I know you said this place for us was not something physical," Will whispers, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side, "but I hope you'll accept my offering. This house, where it all began. I wanted it for both of us."

Hannibal's smile, his joy, is blinding. Will can't look away, but his vision is blurred, and he shivers when a flicker of red passes through Hannibal's irises.

"It's perfect, my daydreamer," Hannibal whispers. He lifts Will's hand, kisses his knuckles, and Will gasps. His thighs and his lungs and his shoulder burns, his heart is slamming itself against the back of his ribs, eager to be caught in Shadow Man's hands. He spreads his fingers on Hannibal's smooth jaw, feels the heat and life in him, wonders what it will feel like to have those jaws part and sink into his neck.

"I think I've run out of patience, Shadow Man," he says, brazen with alcohol and too alight with joy to be anything else.

Hannibal's eyes darken, his gaze rakes down Will's body, as ravenous as always. His purr turns into a growl, low and rumbling, and Will swallows as the tension in his stomach loosens, drops down to something more urgent and hotter.

"Yes," Hannibal whispers, breathy and snarling with desire. "As have I."

They stand, and Will keeps Hannibal's hand firmly in his own as they go up the stairs. He's weak with anticipation, gutted with longing, and his only balm is knowing that Hannibal feels

the same way. Will goes to the master bedroom, pulls Hannibal inside, and shuts the door.

He keeps the lights off. He and Shadow Man are creatures of darkness, and it is here that they are most at home.

Hannibal lets go of his hand and Will swallows, pressing his lips together so that he doesn't whimper. But it escapes when Hannibal takes him by his neck and hair, turns him and presses him against the door. It's a gentle touch, but Will is winded by it, gasping as Hannibal leans in to rest their foreheads together.

Hannibal is slightly taller than him, and strong, and so warm Will thinks he might burst into flames the second their bare skin touches. Hannibal lets out a soft purr, soothing Will from the precipice, and cups his neck. His hand fits perfectly across Will's throat, like Will was literally shaped for him, and he tilts Will's head up, their noses brush, and then Will's lips touch Hannibal's in a chaste, gentle kiss.

He trembles, spine to knees, and grabs a tight hold of Hannibal's arms for purchase. His lips part and Hannibal tilts his head, tightens his hand on Will's neck, his other fist loosely in Will's hair. Their kiss deepens, Will's lower lip gets caught between his teeth just like the last time and he whimpers, unable to stop himself.

Hannibal growls, pressing closer, so there's no air for Will's burning lungs. He lets go of Will's hair and flattens his hand on Will's hip instead, pulling him away from the door so Will can rut against his thigh. It's something deeper than desire, more urgent than sex – Will feels like he could come apart just from a kiss, too touch-starved and sensitive to do anything but submit to Hannibal's mouth and his hand on Will's hammering pulse and let the other Alpha move him as he sees fit.

Hannibal pulls back, his breathing heavy and loud in the room. His thumb digs under Will's jaw and Will knows what he wants – he bares his neck easily, shivering when Hannibal's lips touch his jaw, the soft place under his ear, then his jaws part and he kisses open-mouthed over Will's pulse, where it's fluttery and goes abruptly weak.

"Please," he gasps, clutching at Hannibal's biceps, nails digging into his shirt.

"I've thought about this for so long," Hannibal growls. He licks over the bruise he placed to Will's neck, the pain sharp there and making him ache. "Nothing compares."

He kisses Will's neck again and Will's knees go weak. He collapses forward, his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, his face buried at his collarbone. He smells so good, musky and Alpha and strong and Will has no idea what it's like to be an Omega in heat, but he thinks this could come pretty damn close.

Hannibal growls, moves his hand from Will's neck to his hair, tugs him upright and kisses him again – harsher this time, incensed, and Will finds strength in him to growl back, turn his hands from helpless to driven. He shoves Hannibal back, towards his bed, and is pleased when he receives another snarl for his trouble.

After all, they're both Alphas here.

Hannibal reaches for him and Will goes, prowling to their bed, and Hannibal turns them, pushes Will onto his back and Will lets him give chase, crawling up until they're both on the mattress. The sheets are a mess – Will never bothered to make them – and Will knows the whole room smells like him. Hannibal's victory-scent is sharp, sweet, almond-like. Will's mouth waters.

Hannibal covers him, heavy and so warm, Will can hardly breathe. His hands press flat on Will's flanks and he catches Will's mouth again, bites his lower lip until Will's mouth parts, needing air. Hannibal growls against his mouth, and he tastes of wine and meat. Will thinks about how blood would taste on his skin and he shivers, spine growing hot and clawed, tearing him from the inside out.

He spreads his legs, letting Hannibal's weight between them, and a sharp moan escapes him when he feels Hannibal's cock rutting against his own, trapped behind their clothes. He's shaking, his claws dug deep into Hannibal's back, and he's close already. He grits his teeth and bares his neck when Hannibal kisses him there, whimpering when Hannibal grabs one of his hands and presses it flat to the mattress.

"Don't hold back, darling," he says. He can probably smell how close Will is, the arousal spicing his blood and sharpening his scent. Will gasps, wrapping his fingers tight in Hannibal's.

"I don't want this to end," he replies.

Hannibal lets out a warm, low laugh. "My beautiful boy," he purrs, nuzzles Will's throat, nips at his ear. Will trembles, his heart is beating so harshly and loud that he's sure Hannibal can hear it. "We have the rest of our lives, don't we?"

"Yes," Will gasps. He turns his head, meets Hannibal's eyes. There's just enough light coming in from the moon that he can see how red they are. The whole moment feels surreal, like out of a dream, but that's when it hits Will:

Shadow Man is *here*. He *wants* him. Hannibal loves him.

Hannibal smiles, and his teeth shine. He brings Will's hand to his face, so he can cup Will's cheek, and leans down so their foreheads touch, their noses brush together in something affectionate and desperate all at once. The hand on his flank moves, flattens, spreads out until it's on Will's thigh where the bruises always form.

"Show me," he says, quiet and warm. Will's thighs ache and his shoulder is on fire – every part of him is on fire. He trembles, and Hannibal kisses him, swallowing his moan as Hannibal's hand settles over his erection in his slacks, squeezes oh-so-gently, but it's enough. The anticipation and the desire overwhelm Will and he howls, the sound muffled against Hannibal's lips. He rakes his free hand across Hannibal's back, shreds him with his love, deafens him with need, as his stomach tenses and sinks low and he bares his teeth, bites down on Hannibal's lower lip as his orgasm tears him apart from the inside.

He gasps, tasting blood, and falls back to the bed as the shockwaves of pleasure overtake him. Hannibal's purr is deafening, and he licks Will's open mouth, tastes the blood on his

fangs, and Will whimpers, wrapping his fingers in Hannibal's hair as Hannibal covers him, ruts between his shaking thighs.

"Please," Will begs, lips wet, eyes wide. Hannibal pulls back with a snarl, kneeling up between Will's legs like a monument to some old god, and Will his helpless supplicant laid out in offering.

Hannibal's hands flatten on Will's thighs, strong and commanding, and Will can't tear his gaze away. He's speared in place with the ravenous, carnivore darkness in Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal licks his lips, and Will can see the pink smear of Hannibal's blood on them. He looks hesitant, and Will sits up, reaches for Hannibal, cups his face in a tender touch.

"Hannibal," he whispers, and Hannibal shivers, like his name in Will's mouth is the most decadent kind of torture. "Please."

Hannibal nods, and turns his head to kiss Will's wrist. It's the wrist with the scar on it, and the welt, and it stings when touched. Will hisses, fingers curling, and Hannibal notices. He catches Will's hand before he can pull it away, turns Will's wrist so the light from outside shines over the layers of dark marks on it.

He meets Will's eyes. "No more games," he says, and Will nods, swallowing harshly.

He kisses Will's wrist again, until Will's fingers curl and his stomach feels tense and warm. Then, he takes Will by the nape of his neck and pulls him in for a real kiss. Will knows his lip must hurt, but he kisses as though there's no pain there, no wound. Will licks over his lower lip and gives another whine; supplication, forgiveness.

Hannibal purrs in answer, and then takes Will's hips and lifts them, guiding him onto his hands and knees.

He leans over Will, presses him down with his weight, all his strength and muscle dedicated to keeping Will submissive. Will wants to be, but he's an Alpha, and there's a natural instinct there to fight whatever's at his neck, whatever tries to dominate him.

He curls his fingers in the mattress and tilts his head forward, baring his nape.

Hannibal leans forward, sliding his hands down Will's arms, finds his wrists and wraps his hands tight around them. Will goes tense, fighting the instinct to snarl when he feels Hannibal's mouth at his nape. This is what he *wants*, he's thought about this for as long as he can remember, and he'll be damned if he lets something like biology get in the way now.

Hannibal shushes him, nuzzles his hair where it's starting to curl from sweat in the heat of the room, and lets go of his wrists. "You're not Omega," he says, and Will bites his lip, swallowing back the feeling of disappointment because he knows Hannibal doesn't mean it as an insult. "Do you have anything that will help?"

Will nods, then he lets out a soft whine. "Guest bedroom," he says. "It was under the mattress. I don't know where they put it."

"They?" Hannibal repeats.

"While I was gone, with you, the neighbors helped set the place up," Will replies. He doesn't move as Hannibal keeps touching him, gently petting his flanks, nuzzling his neck. "Made it a home."

Hannibal hums, his smile showing his teeth against Will's neck. "We shall have to thank them," he says. Then, he moves away, and Will whimpers at the loss. "Bare yourself to me, darling, and I shall go find it. I won't be long."

Will swallows, cursing the fact that he should have thought about that sooner. There was no other way for this to go. He pushes himself onto his knees as he hears the door open, pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it to one side. His slacks have been stained, wet and warm with his release, and he pulls them off his body along with his underwear, wincing at the tacky feeling on the inside of the clothes.

By the time he's naked, Hannibal has returned. Will sits facing him, wide-eyed and wanting as Hannibal closes the door. He has a bottle of lubricant in his hand, and when he meets Will's eyes, he smiles.

Will tries to smile back, but he's not sure how well he manages. He's too strung out, too shivery and needy, to make his body do anything that isn't touching Hannibal. Hannibal comes to him and Will reaches for him, savors the feeling of his fine clothes against Will's bare skin. Hannibal growls, kissing him passionately, and Will forgets how to breathe.

Then, Hannibal pulls back, sets the lubricant bottle down, and starts to undress. It's done without hurry, not meant to titillate or for the sake of a show, but Will watches raptly all the same. Each inch of skin bared is like a feast he is eager to devour. He catches, in the light, the flex of muscle in Hannibal's forearms, the smooth bulge of his biceps, the regal and enticing arch of his neck. The sharp shadow between his collarbone and his throat, the thick patch of silvery hair on his chest, blonder as it trails down in a line along the center of his stomach, disappears into his suit pants. His mouth waters as Hannibal's fingers undo his belt, slide it free with a soft slither than makes Will's spine feel hot. His hips do not jut as sharply as Will's do, his age has softened and thickened him, but it just makes him look even more strong, more capable. He's a beast of control and conquest.

He sheds the rest of his clothes and then pushes his underwear down his thighs, revealing his cock. Will's mouth goes dry when he sees it and he crawls forward on the bed, until his knees hit the edge. He takes Hannibal by the hips, drags him forward, and Hannibal's hand rests gently in his hair, his eyes searching when they meet Will's.

"Can I?" Will asks, too hoarse to give volume to the words.

But he's gratified to see Hannibal swallow harshly, his stomach tense with desire, and his eyes are so thoroughly red that Will has a hard time remembering what color they used to be.

"Yes," he says, as whisper-quiet as he did the night he first kissed Will, and Will smiles.

He's as inexperienced with this as he is with everything else, but he also knows there's something to be said for enthusiasm. He parts his lips and moves one hand, wrapping his fingers tentatively around the loose skin at the base of Hannibal's cock where his knot will grow. The thought alone is enough to get his mouth to flood with saliva, and he places a wet, sucking kiss to the head of Hannibal's cock, runs his tongue through the slit and shivers when he tastes wetness there already. He tilts his head, spreads his jaws, and sucks Hannibal's cock into his mouth until his teeth settle past the bulging head.

Hannibal growls, his hand tightening in Will's hair, and Will shivers again. His eyes close and he loosens his jaw, tightens his lips, and sinks down further until Hannibal's cock hits the back of his throat. Hannibal's hand gentles, settling at the nape of his neck, and Will shudders, gagging around the cock in his mouth as he tries to take more in.

"Easy, darling," Hannibal says. His voice is low and wrecked and it just makes Will's lungs burn, his heart aching. His shoulder has stopped complaining and Will isn't sure if it's given up trying to tell him to rest, or if Hannibal's touch is healing, but when he tightens his fingers around Hannibal's cock and starts to stroke what he can't swallow, he doesn't feel any pain.

There's a rumble stuck in his chest, unable to get free, and he pulls back, swallowing the excess saliva and taking in a ragged breath through his nose, and sinks back down. Hannibal growls, and when Will tilts his head to look at him, he sees Hannibal's upper lip curled back, his teeth bared.

Will swallows again, gagging once more because he's too damn eager not to try, and he has to pull off completely, breathing harsh and heavy and head too hot to think.

Hannibal growls, pulling him upright by his nape, and kisses him, savage and brutal. He cups Will's throat with his other hand, testing the give of his flesh, the flex of tendons there when he swallows, and lets out another promising snarl.

"Please," Will whispers, his throat sore, lips tender and red. He pulls Hannibal close to him, trembles when Hannibal's spit-wet cock rubs against his stomach. "Mount me."

"Is that what you want?" Hannibal asks.

Will would be aggravated if he didn't know how much consent mattered to his mate. He nods, kissing Hannibal again. "I've dreamed about it," he says. "Touched myself and imagined it was you, biting my neck, knotting me. I want it."

Hannibal growls. "How many times?"

"Countless."

Hannibal's hands fly to Will's hips, pulling him closer until Will could easily fall off the bed if Hannibal stepped back. But he doesn't – he's a solid anchor, holding Will fast and steady on stormy seas. Will whines when Hannibal pushes him back, to his haunches, then covers him again so Will is laid out flat on the bed. His shoulder hits the bottle of lubricant and he grabs it, holding it out to Hannibal.

Hannibal takes it, a question in his eyes.

"It should be you," Will murmurs.

Hannibal smiles, and leans down for another kiss. "Come here," he says, and sits by Will. Will climbs onto his hands and knees and Hannibal pulls him into his lap and Will shivers, his hands resting on Hannibal's shoulders. Hannibal's big hands flatten on his back, pulling him close until Will can barely breathe without feeling Hannibal's chest against his.

Hannibal opens the lubricant bottle, a quiet 'snick' that makes Will gasp, and then he wraps one arm around Will's back and, with his wet fingers, brushes over Will's hole. Will expects it to feel the same – he's done this to himself more times than he could count – but it's not. It's so much more; hotter, more urgent, pinning him in place on Hannibal's lap as Hannibal curls all but one finger and, his eyes on Will's face, gently pushes it inside.

"Oh, *God*," Will growls, shuddering, his head falling forward against Hannibal's neck. He digs his nails in, whimpering quietly as Hannibal pushes his finger in as deep as it can go. With lubricant and trust, it goes in easily, and Will doesn't feel like he can breathe. He can feel Hannibal purring, aches to hear it, tilts his head to one side to rest his ear against Hannibal's neck so he can feel the vibration of it in his throat.

"All this time," Hannibal whispers, sinking his finger in, pulling it back, stretching Will out. "I imagined the moment you would be mine. How you'd sound. How you'd taste and feel in my arms."

Will trembles, bites his lip hard enough to hurt when Hannibal pushes in with a second finger. It burns, stings his tender insides, but it's all he can do not to push down, and demand Hannibal add another. He declaws one hand, slides it down Hannibal's sweat-slick chest, wraps his fingers around the other Alpha's cock and is pleased when he feels Hannibal shiver.

"Every day," he gasps, presses the words to Hannibal's bared neck, marveling at how much Hannibal trusts and loves him, to allow it. "I want this every day for the rest of my life."

"You'll have it," Hannibal vows, and pushes in with a third finger. It's more than Will has ever had, even by his own hand, and it burns, and aches and his stomach is turning hot and molten, his cock twitching with new energy. He thinks about how Hannibal's knot will feel and the desire almost blinds him.

Will trembles, tightens his hand around the head of Hannibal's cock just to hear him growl. "Do you still want me to mount you, darling?" he asks, and his fingers withdraw and Will's brain howls with emptiness, demanding their return.

He pulls back, meets Hannibal's eyes, and shakes his head. "No," he says. "I need to see you."

Hannibal swallows, every line of his face etched in adoration. "Just like this, then," he replies, and Will nods eagerly. Omegas don't get fucked like this, bred face-to-face. In this room, in the darkness, they stand as equals.

Will pushes himself forward, guides Hannibal's cock between his legs, and rests their foreheads together as Hannibal takes over from there, spreading the rest of the lubricant on his cock and then pressing the head against Will's stretched hole. There's a moment, there, a singular piece of hesitation, of tension, and then Will swallows, and kisses him, and relaxes his body enough that Hannibal can sink into him.

Hannibal snarls – it's a loud, triumphant sound, and Will gasps when Hannibal's hands flatten on his hips, nails digging in, and Will sinks down all the way until the backs of his thighs connect with Hannibal's. His body aches sharply, muscles protesting the new and foreign intrusion, his heart is racing and his hands tremble where they are on Hannibal's chest.

He waits there, and Hannibal lets him, lets his body get used to the stretch of being penetrated, gives him time to fight back the Alpha instinct in his hindbrain triggering him to fight or flee. He will do neither – he's waited for this almost his whole damn life and it's already better than he could have ever dreamed of.

Then, Will sighs, forces himself to relax, and takes one of Hannibal's hands. He presses it to his own neck and shivers when Hannibal's fingers curl, raking across his throat in four harsh red lines.

"Just like that," he whispers, and Hannibal's entire body goes tense, shaking like a thoroughbred in the starting gate. He digs his nails into Hannibal's chest and clenches up around him, memorizes the clench of Hannibal's jaw and the wild redness in his eyes.

He rolls his hips, his soft exhale ruined by a moan, and kisses Hannibal. Deeply, wanton, desperate for his Shadow Man.

Hannibal growls against his mouth, bares his fangs, and uses his free grip on Will's hip to help him move. Will's whole body is sore from cutting down the tree, from lack of sleep in uncomfortable beds, from sitting up at night waiting and wanting, but now he has what he wants. His thighs shake with effort, his lungs burn, and he plants a hand on the wall by Hannibal's head and uses the height advantage to control the kiss, their rhythm.

This is *his* design, now, and it's going to ruin Hannibal from the inside out.

"Will," Hannibal gasps, breathless, shaking finely. He meets Will's eyes like Will holds the universe in them, his mouth red and sore from Will's teeth and kiss.

"Touch me," Will commands, his eyelids fluttering when Hannibal rakes his nails across Will's neck again, lets go of Will's hip to wrap his hand tight around Will's cock, stroking in time with the roll of his hips. Will sighs, tilting his head back, lets Hannibal hear his pleased purr. "Just like that. *Fuck.*"

Hannibal huffs an uneven breath, and the hand on Will's cock slides between his legs, behind his balls, cups and presses up and Will gasps, going still. His ass clenches up and he flinches when he feels Hannibal's cock touch a sensitive spot inside of him, pinched between his fingers. His eyes widen, and he collapses against Hannibal's chest with a helpless moan.

Hannibal smiles, his scent thickening with triumph. He wraps his arm around Will's back again and holds him still as he tucks his feet and thrusts up, hitting that spot again. Will whimpers, clenching his eyes tightly shut, his face in Hannibal's neck.

"*Hannibal*," he growls, dragging his nails down the wall as Hannibal fucks him. It feels so fucking good, Will had no idea it would feel this good. Even in his fantasies, when he imagined Shadow Man mounting him and crumbling him to dust, he had no idea he could light up so brightly.

A raging fire, destroying all in its path.

Hannibal growls, his body tensing, and then he surges forward, rolls Will from the wall and plants him on his back. Will moans, fingers tangling in Hannibal's when they flatten on his thighs, curling him up tightly under Hannibal's weight, and Hannibal uses all of his strength and prowess as an Alpha to fuck him. It's hard, fast, ruinous and brutal and Will shivers, his heart stuttering.

He lets go and wraps his hand around his cock, stroking tightly. He's close again, so fucking close. "Please," he gasps, hardly able to form the word, and Hannibal's upper lip twitches. His eyes fall to Will's neck.

Will swallows. He knows what Hannibal wants. He reaches out and wraps his fingers in Hannibal's hair, pulls him over Will's body, bares his throat. "Please," he says again. "Do it."

Hannibal shudders, his shoulders tensing, cock fucking in deeply to Will's body. His jaws part and Will feels teeth, and then he bites down hard enough to split skin.

Will cries out, his ribs cracking in place as blood rushes from his neck, into Hannibal's mouth and down his chin, staining Will's shoulder and chest. Hannibal fucks in again, slower this time, rutting tight against Will's ass, his hands digging in hard enough to Will's thighs to bruise. Will tightens his hand in Hannibal's hair, wraps his free arm around his shoulders and his legs around Hannibal's waist. He'll be damned if Hannibal pulls away from him now.

Hannibal growls, licks over the bite mark, and goes still. Will hisses, his sore body suddenly forced to stretch more as Hannibal's knot grows and locks within it, tying them together. Hannibal lets go of one thigh and puts his hand to Will's cock, stroking tight and quick.

Will clenches his eyes tightly shut, sucking in harsh breaths through his teeth. His mouth is dry and all he can think about is wetting it with Hannibal's blood.

But Hannibal knows. He must understand, being an Alpha himself. He lets go of Will's other thigh, threads his fingers through Will's sweaty hair, and brings Will's mouth to his neck.

"It's your turn, my daydreamer," he whispers. He stinks of blood and sweat, all Alpha and tied to Will, irreversible, powerful. "Lay claim to your prize."

It's all about the chase. Will isn't a hunter, he's a fisherman, and his fish has caught the hook and now it's time to haul him out of the water.

He licks Hannibal's throat, tastes the salted caramel of his sweat, finds his pulse where it's heaviest under his red-flushed neck, and sinks his teeth into the tender part just shy of his tense tendon.

The flood of pleasure-sweet blood, the tight hand on his cock, the knot thoroughly tearing him apart – it's enough for him to bear down, go tight and tense under Hannibal's weight, spill thick and wet over Hannibal's hand. He howls, choking on it, and releases Hannibal's hair to touch his knot as it half-swells. He tugs on it, rolling his hips to get Hannibal's knot against that sensitive place again, rides each wave of pleasure as it grows claws and tears through his head. His eyes burn with red, savage and snarling under his mate, and he drinks Hannibal down readily, savoring the knowledge that, by morning, his voice will change, giving him the Alpha Voice just as Hannibal receives his, and he will wear a mark on his neck noting him as mated.

When he's too sensitive to touch and his belly is heavy with blood, he pulls back, licks over the wound, and Hannibal takes him by the hair, nuzzles him, kisses him and smears their kills between them. This is what their kind evolved to do; conquer and mate and fuck through the blood-high.

The reward is well worth the risk.

Hannibal breaks the kiss when there's no more air, red shining on his mouth and cheeks, and Will gasps up the ceiling, finally letting himself go lax. He cradles Hannibal's nape, forehead to forehead as Hannibal continues to empty himself inside Will's body.

Hannibal loosens his tight hold on Will's hair, gentles it, cups his nape in return, thumb brushing the edge of the bloody bite mark on Will's neck. Will smiles, showing his teeth, and Hannibal returns it. Will wants to laugh – he wants to shout his joy through the woods, over the entire town, loud enough that the whole of Baltimore hears him.

Hannibal rolls them onto their sides to wait out his knot, so he doesn't crush Will. Their legs tangle, their breaths meet and are swallowed by each other, their heartbeats fall into sync. "Shadow Man," Will whispers, and Hannibal smiles at him, "why did you leave that first riddle, about the candle?"

Hannibal hums, and pets Will's sweaty hair back from his face. "To see what would happen," he replies. Will huffs, rolling his eyes. "Little did I know that that single candle, that tiny flame of possibility, would turn into such a roaring fire."

Will laughs. "And now?" he asks.

"Now, that fire is mine," Hannibal says. Will shivers, still so affected by the casual possessiveness and assuredness in Hannibal's voice. "As is mine, yours."

"Do you think you have an ending to that song?"

Hannibal's laugh is low and gentle, his kiss full of adoration. "Yes," he replies. "I believe I do."

They spend the weekend just like that. They talk about everything, anything. Will learned enough about the world to have an interest in most things. They discuss art, mythology, physics, and biology. Will learns about all the times Hannibal kept watch over him, how he attended every soccer game, was there for every parent-teacher conference, how he mourned Will's father's death and sent flowers to Will's uncle with no name. Will didn't know about that.

Will spends the better part of an hour analyzing Hannibal's handwriting, and laughs at how offended Hannibal is with his accuracy.

Will is too sore to take Hannibal's knot for a while, after that first night, but he learns how to pleasure Hannibal with his mouth, learns how good it feels when Hannibal takes him by the hair, bends him over his dining room table and uses his lips, tongue, and fingers to pierce his body. He learns how to touch Hannibal in turn, where the sensitive spots are on his flesh. He learns how to growl just right to get Hannibal's eyes to flash red, to provoke him to chase.

Sunday night, he leads Hannibal to the site of the old tree and lets his mate fuck him right there, where it all began, and Will is pretty sure his neighbors hear him when Hannibal's knot splits him apart.

On Monday, Hannibal must return to his office, to his own house. Will doesn't mind – why would he? Shadow Man will never leave him again.

But that doesn't stop him kissing Hannibal breathlessly against the door of his car, stealing his air and touching Hannibal's bitten neck. They both have bruises around the bites, suck-kisses and new scars where their teeth were itchy, and their mouths were dry. Will has bites on his thighs, his stomach, the backs of his shoulders. Hannibal has claw marks on either side of his spine and a deep, blooming bruise just shy of his heart.

"I'll be back tomorrow," Hannibal promises him. Will smiles, and lets Hannibal hear his purr, and doesn't miss how reluctantly Hannibal gets in the car, how slowly he drives away.

Alana calls him in the mid-afternoon. "Hey," he greets, smiling as he sits at the dining room table, absently toying with a rubber band. He hasn't felt the need to put one around his wrist since Friday night.

"Don't you 'Hey' me, you asshole!" she replies.

Will huffs a laugh. "What'd I do this time?"

"What'd I do this time.... Honestly, I swear to God if we weren't friends and I didn't love you so much I'd kick your ass."

Will hums, and waits.

"You *mated* with Hannibal!" she says in his silence.

"Oh," Will says lightly, flicking the rubber band again. "That's what I did."

"You let me think you didn't like him, leave town, and then he comes back with a Goddamn bite mark on his neck and *stinking* of you! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Alana, can't I have *some* mystery to my life?" Will says, teasing, grinning. At this feet, Winston and Addy are wagging their tails wildly, obviously pleased at seeing Will so happy. She makes an annoyed sound, the kind people make when they're happy but are still aggravated. "Okay, so yeah, I guess I like him. He makes me happy. Our eyes locked in a crowded room."

"You're such a dick," Alana breathes. Will laughs, rolling his eyes.

"Sorry, you're gonna have to fall in love with Margot and adopt a bunch of kids without me."

"Oh, the horror," she replies. Will can tell she's rolling her eyes. "But seriously, I'm happy for you, even if you're being a jerk about it." Will huffs. "So, does this mean you're moving back to Baltimore?"

"No," Will replies. Happily, without reservation. "I'm staying here. This is where I belong."

"That's a long commute," she says slowly.

"We'll work it out," Will says. He's sure Hannibal is well prepared for any eventuality, including something like a bay between them. They've been separated for much longer, after all. It doesn't matter to him.

He looks over to the fireplace. The fire died out on Friday and he hasn't felt the need to light it again. He feels like the heat in his chest could keep him warm through the longest, worst winter.

"Well, I'm happy for you either way. I gotta go give Hannibal grief now. Talk to you later!"

"Be gentle with him," Will says warmly, smiling. "I wore him out."

"*God*, you suck. Bye!"

"Goodbye," he replies, and hangs up. He stands, stretching and smiling at the feeling of worn, tender muscles. His neck aches sharply when he turns just right, and his shoulder has come back to remind him of all the abuse it's taken, and his ass and thighs are definitely due some T.L.C., but he's happy. He's content.

He's home.

He goes to the social on Monday night.

"Will, so glad you finally made – oh!" Deborah's eyes widen, seeing his neck. She blinks rapidly in quick succession, like she's having a stroke. "I didn't know you were seeing someone!"

Will smiles, nodding to her. He can see Elijah, Molly, and Wally in a corner, conversing over paper plates of chips and mini sausages. He nods to them and they nod back, and Molly lifts her hand in a little wave that he returns. "Sorry to disappoint," he replies.

"Not at all!" Deborah says, putting a hand on his arm. "Are they local?"

"No," Will replies, shaking his head. "I've known him for as long as I can remember. He lives in Baltimore."

"You shall have to bring him by next week!"

Will laughs, wondering how she would react to knowing that Hannibal is an Alpha. He might do it, just to see the look on everyone's faces.

"He's much more a social butterfly than I am," Will replies kindly. "I hardly think he'll say 'No'."

She smiles.

"I wanted to thank you, by the way. For all the help with the house, and the food. You've really made me feel welcome here."

Her smile widens, matronly and soft. "It's my pleasure," she says with another pat to his arm. "I've seen a lot of lost souls in my time, and sometimes all they need is a friendly face and a reminder that they're loved, to find their way home again."

Will smiles. He can't argue with that.

Hannibal returns to him on Tuesday, as he'd promised. He brings wine and salted caramel chocolate and Will comes home to find him in the kitchen, with appliances Will definitely doesn't own, and the house smells of warm meat and joy.

He comes up behind Hannibal and nuzzles his shoulder, drawing his attention. Hannibal's purr is gentle, and Will smiles, matching it with one of his own.

"Smells delicious," he says.

"I think you'll like it," he replies.

"I'll get fat if you keep feeding me this well."

Hannibal laughs, and turns to kiss Will's forehead. "I finished my composition," he says. Will lifts his head. "I think you'll like it."

"I'll come home with you tonight, so I can hear it," Will replies. Hannibal's smile softens, like he's surprised at how eagerly Will wants to be at his side. Will nuzzles him again and kisses his clothed shoulder. "What's for dinner?"

Nothing comes for a moment, and Will turns, meeting Hannibal's dark eyes. There's something there, some hidden secret that Will doesn't know if he should be able to see. Hannibal clears his throat and turns his attention back to the stove.

"I had intended to make a special meal for us, when the time came," he begins, and Will's frown deepens. "But good meat only lasts so long. Twenty-seven years is a long time for anything to keep."

Will tilts his head to one side, and blinks. His eyes fall to the stove, and realization hits him like a sledgehammer.

John's kidney had been missing, but a huge part of his thigh had been taken as well.

"How long did it keep?" he whispers.

"I ate when I found you again," Hannibal replies, falsely calm. "Turned it into jerky so it would last longer. Three years, give or take."

John's meat.

The Chesapeake Ripper doesn't keep his organs for trophies. He takes them because he's hungry.

Will clears his throat, and swallows, and lifts his eyes to meet Hannibal's again. There's a steadiness there – not confidence, but calm. He doesn't know how Will is going to react, but he's trusting. In love. And Will has spent all this time in love with a killer. It didn't bother him before.

He's not sure it does now.

He thinks about how Garrett Jacob Hobbs had felt, dying in his arms. How Will wanted to lick the blood from his torn neck and rip him to shreds.

"Who was it?" he whispers.

Hannibal presses his lips together, not looking away. Alphas don't break eye contact. They don't blink. "A man who felt like he didn't need to tip at a restaurant," he replies.

Will laughs. He can't help it. "Well then," he murmurs, clearing his throat. "He deserved it."

Hannibal nods. Once. Sharply.

"And dinner? With Margot and Alana?"

"An unforgivably rude dental student," Hannibal replies.

Will swallows. It's the ultimate act of dominance, consuming a kill. Their kind has been doing it since man first learned what meat tasted like.

"Did you wait until we mated?" he asks. "Until I couldn't run away?"

"We have choices in this life, Will, and decisions that portray us as who we are," Hannibal replies. "I never lied to you."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I think it does," Hannibal says.

Will nods. He doesn't turn away. He doesn't retreat. He takes another deep inhale, smells meat and paper and Hannibal's salted-caramel scent. Shadow Man's scent.

"You don't have to eat this. I have chicken, and I bought new oysters. The ones you had didn't keep."

"No," Will says, before he can think about it. "I want to." He lifts his eyes, drops them, then meets Hannibal's gaze again. He sees a blossom of hope there, of happiness, and he steps forward and cups Hannibal's cheek. "I want to eat what you brought me."

Shadow Man is the ultimate provider. In every move, every action, he has cared for Will and cultivated his growth, his becoming. It would be the ultimate insult to turn him away now. And Will doesn't want to – it's insane, of course it is, but that's the way the world works. Kill or be killed. Devour, or be devoured.

Hannibal smiles, and he cups Will's nape, his hand unbearably warm, and pulls him in for a kiss. Will answers him eagerly, breathless, exalted.

"There's still some time left," Hannibal says when they part. Will rests his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder and takes in another deep breath. He should care about what Hannibal's cooking. He should care about a lot of things.

He doesn't. His lizard brain is telling him his mate is strong, a protector, a provider. He killed and conquered a lesser Alpha and brought his kill to Will for them both to feast. It's one of the strongest proclamations of love Will can imagine.

Will smiles. "How long?"

"Long enough for me to show you how much I love you."

He laughs, and takes Hannibal's hand. "Show me, then."

Hannibal still leaves, most mornings. He has appointments and patients he still must see. Will teaches his remote classes, and even when his bed is cold and empty, he doesn't feel alone. He looks out the window and sees Orion over the tops of the trees, and next to it, Jupiter. He knows Hannibal is seeing them at the same time.

And every morning, whether Hannibal spends the night or not, Will comes downstairs to a letter in the letterbox nailed to his door. A letter from Shadow Man, but not with riddles, or games. Sometimes there are gifts.

Always the same message.

"I love you, my daydreamer."

And every night, Will leaves one of his own, rolled up tight like an ancient proclamation and kept in place with a thin rubber band:

"I love you too, Shadow Man."

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

crawls out from under a pile of smoking rubble okay so.....I can explain.

I made the mistake of saying I wanted to write some kinky shit around Luc (maydei) and, being the shameless enabler that they are, they started hyping me up with some Daydreamer 'verse smut ideas.

Plot-wise, it's a little thin. This takes place a few months after Hannibal and Will get together, and it's focusing more on Will's self-esteem issues and his fear of abandonment ('cause, you know, it took Shadow Man 27 YEARS to finally claim him). but really, this is meant to be porn. 16k of porn.

There's orgasm denial, breeding kink, a //smidge// of daddy!kink, more obvious D/s stuff, um.....
Yeah.

Enjoy! I'm gonna go sleep for 10 years.

The room is quiet and calm. A fire blazes, heating the small living room area like it has a personal vendetta against the outside air. Even though it's mid-June, the nights still get uncomfortably cold where Will lives. In Hannibal's house it's much more comfortable and climate-controlled, but this house is older, and most of the temperature control comes down to opening windows and lighting a fire in the hearth.

He's sitting in a thickly-padded armchair, shoulders braced against one armrest and legs slung over the other. The seat is just wide enough to fit his torso, albeit at the sacrifice of his neck's comfort. But he sits, his chest and gut warm with alcohol. His mate has been experimenting with making wine and beer and Will is his personal guinea pig (along with Alana and Margot, when they all have dinner together).

He takes another sip of his wine, which is thicker than he'd expect from wine, and tastes like elderflower and has a sharp iron-like aftertaste and it's definitely his favorite so far. The wall by his head is illuminated suddenly in a moving arc of fake, bright light, and he smiles. He always leaves the door unlocked now, knowing that his neighbors won't bother him, and trusting that the only real predator loves him too much to hurt him.

He sighs, rolls over to save his neck, and curls his legs up onto the seat of the armchair, one arm serving as a pillow for his cheek, bent back so he can support his neck. He sets the wine glass down on the floor, so he doesn't drop it, and fits his other hand between his thighs, closing his eyes.

The door opens, and Will smiles when he hears Winston and Addy rise from their places by the fire, woofing in quiet greeting as Shadow Man steps through the door. There's a soft rumble from the other Alpha, greeting the pets with a gentle touch, before he clicks his tongue. Will has trained them to go to the kitchen at the sound of it and he hears their nails clicking across the floor as they obey.

His smile widens when he hears the kitchen door close, and then there's a shadow in front of him, blocking the orange light and the heat of the fire. Shadow Man crouches down and gently takes his hand from between his legs, and Will curls his fingers around his mate's as his hand is brought to Shadow Man's mouth. He kisses Will's knuckles, and Will opens his eyes.

Hannibal's face is sharp with shadows, his eyes almost too dark to see the flecks of red and brown within them. He smiles at Will, presses his nose to the back of Will's hand and turns it so that he can kiss Will's palm.

Will purrs, unable to help himself. He can't help feeling like every cell in his body lights up under Hannibal's touch, knowing the call and presence of its master and mate. His fingers curl and brush Hannibal's jaw. "Hi," he breathes.

Hannibal's smile widens, he goes to his knees and sighs, leaning in to touch his forehead to Will's. Will tilts his head up, nuzzling him as their noses brush. "Hello, darling," he replies, low and soft with affection. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

Will shakes his head, just a small movement. He presses his lips together, licks them, parts them. "No," he replies, touch still so gentle on Hannibal's face. Hannibal smiles. "Are you hungry? Do you want something to drink?"

"The only hunger I felt today was for you," Hannibal replies, and he says it so casually, as though commenting on the weather. Like he has no idea how hard saying something like that hits Will. Like he didn't spend years making it so.

Will's fingers shake, and brush over the faded mating scar on the side of Hannibal's neck. "And now?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles, and runs his free hand up Will's thigh, settles it wide and warm on his hip. Will's stomach clenches and he presses his thighs together tightly, too tightly curled up to arch into the touch like he wants to.

"The mere sight of you provides me nourishment," Hannibal replies.

Will swallows. "I would see you sated, if you're hungry."

Hannibal smiles, and tilts his head, and Will meets him. Their mouths meet, the kiss is gentle, chaste, but warms Will down to the bones. Hannibal's purr is soft in his chest and Will answers it with one of his own, curling his fingers around Hannibal's neck, up through his hair, to make the kiss last longer, deepen when Will's jaws part and he lets Hannibal taste the wine on his tongue.

Although Will knows Hannibal would gladly push his thighs apart and make this encounter more urgent, wilder, he can tell Hannibal is tired. The drive is long, and Will didn't spend the night with Hannibal last night, as Hannibal had spent most of it hunting and had early appointments. He sighs, gentles the kiss, and pulls away so he can meet his mate's eyes.

"I'd like to rest," he says, because he knows Hannibal will sooner follow Will's needs than that of his own body. If Will asked, Hannibal would remain awake and dedicate every ounce of strength he had left to pleasing his mate, but if Will wants to sleep, it gives them both the opportunity to remain calm. Will has never been good at listening to his body when it demanded sleep, rest, or relaxation – it's easier to ask for when Hannibal benefits as well.

Hannibal nods, smiling in that way he does when he knows exactly what Will is thinking, and pushes himself to his feet. Will whines when it means he can't touch Hannibal anymore, but he slides his hand into Hannibal's open palm when it's offered. Hannibal pulls him upright and Will goes, pliant and lax in his mate's arms.

He takes Will's hand and leads him upstairs. Will's bedroom is still sparsely decorated, used only for sleep and for sex when Hannibal is with him – as opposed to Hannibal's room, which has places to sit and books on the shelves, and art to admire, and they have spent many nights playing Chess or reading in quiet contentment.

Will pulls his shirt over his head and Hannibal undresses, taking out a change of clothes from his messenger bag and donning lounge pants and a thin t-shirt that sags at the collar from many years of use. Will smiles at him, and holds out his hand, and Hannibal goes to him, purring when Will wraps his fingers in Hannibal's hair and pulls him into a kiss.

"I'm going to let the dogs go outside. I'll be right back," he murmurs, receiving a soft rumble in answer. He leaves the room and goes to the kitchen, unlocks the dog door in the back so that Winston and Addy can come and go as they please, and shuts the kitchen door behind him. He pours water over the fire and leaves the chimney open, so it can air out, and then returns upstairs.

Hannibal is not asleep, but clearly halfway there. Will's smile softens, and he slides into bed behind his mate, his nose in Hannibal's hair and one arm slung over his heaving ribs. He purrs when Hannibal shifts his weight, making room for him, and closes his eyes.

Dawn touches them tentatively, like a child crawling into their parents' bed after a nightmare. Will feels the sun on his face and turns, huffing in aggravation, his face pressed to the pillow and his hair falling forward to shield his eyes.

At some point, they reversed positions. Hannibal is warm at his back, his hand flat on Will's bared lower stomach in a touch as gentle and subtly possessive as always. Will sighs, and bites his lower lip, letting himself be reluctantly dragged into wakefulness.

Hannibal huffs, nosing at Will's nape, and kisses the exposed, pink skin there, making Will shiver. "Good morning, darling," he rasps, voice low and rough with sleep. It makes Will smile.

"Too early," he replies.

He feels Hannibal smile. His hand slides up Will's stomach, comes to a rest over the beat of his heart. Will sucks in a deep breath through parted lips, loving the scent of them as it hangs in the warm air, lazy like the swirl of dust in sunlight. The salted caramel of Hannibal's joy is his favorite scent, he's greedy with it, and turns in Hannibal's embrace, and puts his nose against his mate's neck, eager for more from the source.

Hannibal's purr is quiet, he shifts in the bed so that more of his neck is exposed, propped up on the pillows at the head of Will's bed. Will chases him, slides close and rests his hand on Hannibal's chest, licks over the mating bite he placed the first night they spent together.

"Do you have to leave soon?" he asks.

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies. "I have nothing calling me back to Baltimore today."

Will freezes, pulls back, a wide smile on his face. "Really?" he asks.

Hannibal nods, the red in his eyes gentle to match his smile. "Really," he says. He lifts his hand from Will's back, pets his mess of curls from his forehead so he can see Will's eyes. He leans in, nuzzles Will's cheek, kisses the corner of his smiling mouth. "I've missed you, my daydreamer. Every moment I'm apart from you stretches on for an eternity. I fear it's gotten worse in the months I've spent warming your bed."

Will sighs. It's a sentiment he understands, and feels as well. He misses Hannibal as soon as they're not in the room together. "Do you want me to return to Baltimore?" he asks, sure that that's where this conversation is headed.

So he's surprised when Hannibal frowns, and shakes his head. "Of course not," he replies. "This is our place. The place you made for us."

Will nods, ducking his gaze. His fingers curl against Hannibal's chest and he bites his lower lip. "I would," he says, quietly, rushed. "If you wanted me to. I would do it."

"I know," Hannibal replies. He touches his forehead to Will's, cups his face and forces him to lift his eyes. "That's why I will never ask it of you."

Will blinks, and frowns. This is more like Shadow Man – Shadow Man doesn't ask anything of him, he never has, until Will was ready. He's not ready, right now. Perhaps he never will be – the idea of moving back to Baltimore and suffering under the watchful, wanting eyes of Jack makes him bristle. He can't go back, but if Hannibal wants him to...

He sighs, and rolls away, pushing himself upright. "Are you hungry? I'm hungry," he says.

He gets out of bed and retrieves his shirt, not looking Hannibal's way. He feels bristly and uncertain for the first time in a long time, his hands shake, and he hears Hannibal rising as well. He should go to the door, go downstairs, but he knows Hannibal will follow him.

He wants to be followed.

Hannibal's warmth rests at his side, and a gentle hand flattens between his shoulders. Will tenses, bites his lower lip, and sighs when Hannibal kisses his temple, lips soft and warm.

Will closes his eyes, a whine stuck in his chest. He doesn't want to fight, and isn't even sure if this counts as a fight. Twenty-seven years is a good run for a couple, to have never fallen out. But they have always had one point of contention.

Namely, the idea of being separated. Will has fought that particular bit in his mouth for as long as he can remember.

He shivers, and turns into Hannibal's arms, presses himself close to his chest and whines against the collarbones exposed by his shirt. "I don't want to fight," he whispers, curling his fingers in Hannibal's shirt where it sits at his waist.

Hannibal huffs a small laugh, wraps his arms around Will and holds him close. "Nor do I," he replies, and kisses Will's forehead. Will whines again. "Let me make us something to eat. I brought another flavor of wine I think you'll like."

Will huffs, unable to stop his eyeroll. "It's still the morning," he says, half-chiding.

"Decadence subscribes to no man-made hour," Hannibal replies.

Will laughs, his discomfort and the ache in his chest abruptly melting. He pulls back, lifts his head, and kisses his mate once, chaste and happy. "You're right," he says, and is pleased to smell that Hannibal is still happy, still simply overjoyed at being in Will's presence. He uncurls his fingers and touches Hannibal's neck. "Let's eat."

Throughout his life, and his education, Will has been exposed to almost every kind of perversion he can imagine. Social, sexual, you name it, Will has read about it somewhere, studied the unique natures and environments of people who indulge in the depraved, the abnormal.

He's tried to keep it to study, as much as possible.

Once Will realized he was gay – or perhaps not even gay, just in love with an Alpha, just one Alpha, no one else – he knew he would face enough stigma without adding to it any kind of kink or perversion he could imagine.

Now, knowing that his mate is a psychiatrist and a keen study of the human mind, he is even more wary. He is reluctant to even bring it up in conversation. He doesn't need Hannibal

knowing things about what he likes, wondering in the back of his mind if the desires started because of an absent father figure, if, when he grew up around Alphas like Chris and John, it created in him a desire for Alphas with a certain kind of presence. The White Knights, the Good Guys, the men with sweet smiles and disarming voices, gentle and soft until they weren't.

The kind of men who took control, were possessive, dark-natured. The kind of men Shadow Man is.

He's startled from his thoughts when Hannibal pets a hand through his hair, and looks up from a book he hadn't been reading. Hannibal smiles at him and Will returns it, closing his book and setting it down, making room for his mate on the little couch in their living room.

"You were quite deep in thought," Hannibal says mildly, taking his seat. Their bellies are full with Hannibal's kill that he'd brought in coolers from the night before. Will feels lax, sated, his head warm and a feeling of satisfaction sitting heavy on his shoulders as it always does when Hannibal feeds him.

Will presses his lips together, cheeks coloring as he remembers what, exactly, he'd been thinking about.

Hannibal notices. His smile turns wide, shape at the edges. "Care to share?" he asks mildly.

Will swallows, looks away, but his eyes are always drawn back to Hannibal like a compass to magnetic North. "Shame," he says, and Hannibal blinks, tilting his head to one side. "I've been giving a lot of thought to the idea of shame."

"Any particular flavor?"

Will bites his lower lip, sighs, curls his knees up so his heels rest on the edge of the couch and he lays his arms across his knees, his chin on those. "Not really," he replies.

Hannibal hums, and doesn't reply immediately. Will can feel his eyes on his face, and resists the urge to cover his neck. His shoulders are tense, waiting for Hannibal to strike.

Finally, Hannibal sits forward, his fingers curling under Will's chin and gently turning his head, so their eyes meet. "Will," he begins, and stops, like he's lost his train of thought in Will's eyes. He swallows. "I sincerely hope that you don't feel like there isn't anything you can't tell me, or share with me."

Will shivers, fingers curling and digging into the sides of his knees. "I'm sorry," he says, because he feels like he should. There's something raw and frantic in his chest, rolling between his ribs like the coils of a snake, crushing his lungs and his heart. "I'm not good at... talking about stuff like this."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side.

"I've never had to worry about saying the wrong thing," Will adds.

Hannibal blinks at him, and his eyes clear with something like understanding. He smiles. "I see," he murmurs, contemplative. Then, he stands, and lets go of Will's face. Will frowns at him as Hannibal turns away, goes to his bag which is sitting on Will's dining table, and takes a notebook and a pen from it, returning to the couch.

He sits down, opens the book, and writes on the first page, angled so that Will can't see. Then, he tears the page out, and hands it to Will.

"What are you thinking about, my daydreamer?"

Will's breath catches, his fingers trembling as he touches Hannibal's fine script. Shadow Man's script. The ink is wet and his fingers smear on the 'Y' of 'daydreamer', and he swallows. Hannibal hands him his pen and Will presses the paper against his knees, scrawling his reply frantically;

"Sometimes I feel like you're years ahead of my development. I was so young, and had so much to learn, and even now, with all that I know, with all that you've shown me, I still feel like a child. You were my only stable foundation, my only constant. Yet I feel like there are parts of each other we don't know."

He holds the note to Hannibal, who reads it, his expression unchanging. He hands Will his notebook, so Will can continue to write without interruption – he has no problem verbally replying. "Why do you think this upsets you so much?" he asks out loud.

Will bites his lower lip, and swallows. His fingers curl.

"If you had come to me when I was a child," he writes, "I would know you a lot better. I could be...more."

Hannibal hums. "So every moment we spend away from each other is another opportunity lost. To know me. For me to know you."

Will nods, swallowing. "Something like that," he says, out loud. Then, he writes; "I learn through observation. When I can't observe you, I lose pieces of you."

Hannibal smiles when he reads that. "You wish to consume me in my entirety."

"Yes," Will breathes. He's bolder now, and closes the notebook. Now that the conversation has opened itself up, he thinks he can speak freely. "When I was younger, I would think of you. Of Shadow Man. You came to me in my dreams, and I would wake up with this frantic need, this longing, that I could not sate except with my own hand and my imagination." He licks his lips and looks at Hannibal, a whine stuck in his chest. "You could have come for me when I was mature, at sixteen. When I graduated, at eighteen. You could have taken me from my home when I was a child. You didn't. And when you came to me here, that first night, and kissed me, you could have taken all of me then, but you didn't. And I know why, but now you're mine, and I'm yours, and I'm ashamed of how desperately I want you."

Hannibal hums, lifting his chin. "You see this desperation as petulant. Childish."

Will nods. "Isn't it?" he asks. "I'm jealous of sharing my toys with others."

Hannibal huffs a laugh, his smile wide and full of adoration.

"I've only ever been in love with one person," Will continues. "If you leave, there's nothing else for me. I'm terrified of screwing this up."

Hannibal smiles, and sits forward, taking Will's hand. "Do you believe you could?" he asks, and he sounds genuinely curious.

"I don't know," Will replies. His fingers curl between Hannibal's and squeeze tightly. "I can't help but think that there are things you want, needs I'm not sating." *Things I need that I'm too afraid to ask for.* He swallows – he doesn't want to know the answer, and yet; "Have you had other lovers? Before me? During me?"

"Fleeting bedfellows," Hannibal says, honestly. Will's throat feels tight. "Companions to sate a physical need, nothing more."

Will nods. He doesn't know what to say to that. His mouth is dry. Hannibal regards him, his sharp eyes all-seeing, and then he smiles.

"I will show you," he says, soft with promise. "I will make you understand."

"How?" Will whispers.

Hannibal's smile widens, and he stands, pulling Will to his feet. He draws Will into a loose, gentle embrace, puts a hand in his hair, and kisses him deeply. Will moans, weakly, arching against Hannibal's chest as Hannibal's hand settles on his nape.

Hannibal draws back, cupping Will's face, and rests their foreheads together. "What you seek is justification," he says. "Validation. You fear that there exists in you, somewhere, a fatal flaw that I will see, and recoil from."

Will swallows, his hands resting flat on Hannibal's chest. "I suppose," he says. He's not used to people being able to spear the heart of the matter so eloquently. Alana is too polite, and Jack is too brash to really pay attention.

But Hannibal knows, because he sees, and understands.

He smiles. "I'd like to propose something, then," he says quietly. "An experiment, at the end of which I hope you will realize that there is nothing you could do, or say, or need, that would dampen my affection for you."

"Is this like a game?" Will breathes. Shadow Man had promised him no more games, but their presence has been so constant in Will's life, puzzles and brainteasers and riddles. He wonders, absently, if his frustration can stem just as much from their absence, as Hannibal's.

"In that there is a goal, and risk and reward, yes," Hannibal replies, smiling and pressing his lips to Will's forehead. "Would you like to play?"

Will nods because he can't stop himself. But he doesn't want to stop himself. "What are the rules?" he asks, kissing the words against Hannibal's jaw, pleased when he feels his mate shiver, his arms tightening around Will's body and holding him close.

Hannibal smiles, purring softly. "You have spent much of your life studying human nature," he says. His voice is getting lower, soft with intent. He spreads his fingers on Will's flanks and Will shivers, biting his lower lip as Hannibal turns him, so his back is to his mate's chest. He nods, bowing forward, exposing the nape of his neck. "In your studies, through your education, what do you believe motivates an Alpha, above all else?"

"Pride," Will whispers, and trembles when Hannibal noses at the nape of his neck, parting his jaws to place a gentle, open-mouthed kiss on his pink skin. His fingers curl and he settles them over Hannibal's as Hannibal embraces him, touch landing gently on Will's stomach.

He feels Hannibal nod, hears his purr and presses back, seeking the vibration in his mate's chest. "Pride, and...?"

Will swallows, licking his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. His eyes fall to his bare feet and he watches as one of Hannibal's hands slides lower, curls around the hem of his shirt and drags it up to expose a sliver of skin.

He jerks, gasping sharply, when Hannibal's teeth settle below his ear. "What else, darling?"

"The chase," Will replies, stomach clenching up tightly under Hannibal's touch. His body, as it always has and always will, reacts immediately to the touch of its mate, Hannibal's callus-free fingers dragging feather-light through the trail of hair between his navel and cock. Hannibal's nails dig in, drag down, dip under the hem of Will's sweatpants. "The risk has to be worth the reward."

"Exactly," Hannibal purrs, kissing the shell of Will's ear. Will shivers, tilts his head and closes his eyes as Hannibal's fingers wrap around his cock, shove his sweatpants down to expose him. He stokes once, gently, gathers the little bead of wetness at the tip and spreads it back down. "And I have been chasing you for twenty-seven years."

Will swallows, trying to focus long enough to understand what Hannibal is saying. His mate never says anything without it meaning something. His brow furrows and he gasps, jaw clenching when Hannibal's hand slides down his cock, teases at the loose patch of skin at the base where his knot would grow if Will was inside someone.

He rears back, head falling to Hannibal's shoulder as Hannibal growls. He nuzzles Will's bared neck, licks over his jaw. "I want you to try and see this chase from the perspective of a hunter," he growls. "A mindset I only gave you a glimpse of, towards the end."

Will whimpers, baring his teeth.

"I could have come for you when you were young," Hannibal says. Will knows this. "I could have come for you when you were sixteen, and mature. When you were eighteen, and free. Why didn't I?"

"I wasn't ready," Will says tightly. "But..." He gasps, shivering when Hannibal tightens his hand at the head of Will's cock, twists his wrist, strokes back down. "I think you were afraid."

"Oh?" Hannibal's voice is so low, growling-quiet like a hunting tiger. But Will can hear how pleased he is.

Will whines, reaches back and digs his nails into Hannibal's thighs, urging his mate closer to him. Hannibal's erection presses hot and hard against his ass and Will's mouth suddenly floods, wet with want. He turns his head and nips at Hannibal's chin.

"I wasn't ready to accept what you are," Will breathes. "Who you are. Fatal flaws run both ways."

Hannibal growls, softly, and lets Will go, turning him around again and taking him by the neck. Their mouths meet, and Will is hungry, ravenous as he kisses Hannibal, swallows his snarl and arches against his chest, his cock rutting against Hannibal's thigh.

Hannibal pulls back, tightens his hand on Will's neck so he cannot give chase. Their eyes meet, red flashing in Hannibal's irises that Will knows is mirrored in his own. Hannibal smiles, and his free hand wraps around Will again. Will shivers, eyelids fluttering to half-mast, but he won't give Hannibal the satisfaction of seeing them close.

Hannibal smiles, showing his teeth. "Here are the rules, my daydreamer," he murmurs. Will swallows, the pressure at his throat making him moan. "Today, you will play my part. You will resist succumbing to your own desires. No matter how I ask for you, no matter how I touch you, and beg for you, you will not allow yourself to be weak."

His hand releases Will's cock, and he pulls Will's sweatpants over him, settling them on his hips. Will gasps, whining.

"And I will come to you," Hannibal continues. Will barely recognizes his voice, with how low it's gotten. "I will kiss you, and touch you, and assault your desires as ardently as you assaulted mine. And," he pauses, meets Will's eyes to make sure his words land; "We will see how long your pride holds out."

Will sucks in a breath, his lungs seizing with desire. He has never had to control himself like that before – he has always been allowed to roam wildly, lunging against the bars of his enclosure, howling for his mate, and it was always up to Shadow Man to resist. But now, Will must be the strong one. The one in control.

He regards his mate, and wonders if Hannibal can see the challenge in his eyes.

Then, Hannibal smiles, and Will knows he can. "Do you still want to play?" he asks. Always asking for consent. Always wanting to be sure.

Will licks his lips, and nods. "What if I don't want to play anymore?" he murmurs. For he is sure, the way this is going, he will lose. It is as inevitable as tides and sunrises, as surely set in stone as their destinies were when Will first crawled, eight years old and knowing no

better, to the letterbox that now sits on his front door and answered Shadow Man's first riddle.

Hannibal smiles, and his hand gentles, petting through Will's hair.

"You will call me by name," he murmurs. Not Shadow Man. Not Alpha.

Will licks his lips, and nods.

"Good," Hannibal whispers.

"When does the game start?" Will asks. His body is flushed hot, cheeks and neck red. His cock aches and he's sure it won't go away any time soon.

Hannibal's eyes rake over his face, and he leans in and steals Will's fluttering breath in one more kiss. "Now."

Will remains jittery and on edge for most of the morning, which he knows is by Hannibal's design. His heart pounds in his chest whenever Hannibal looks at him, his gut tight and fingers curling in anticipation of a touch, the touches Hannibal promised. He has to resist, meaning he cannot go to his mate like he's become used to. He cannot reach for Hannibal, or kiss him, or bare his throat and spread his legs and beg Hannibal to sate the needs biting at the backs of their necks.

They play Chess. Will has always been intermediate at best, but in his courtship with Hannibal he has gotten much better. Still, it's hard to think as they play. He cannot meet his mate's eyes, but the sight of his hands provides no relief either. The veins and tendons on the backs of his hands and in his wrists taunt Will. The curl of his fingers, the stretch of skin over his knuckles, conjure to Will's mind memories of so many nights, and touches, knowledge of how his mate can bring him so easily and quickly to the edge of complete bliss.

He loses the game. Hannibal's eyes are dark, like he knows what Will is thinking. His smile is fond. Will's leg jogs up and down and he runs a hand through his hair, stifling his whine. He knows, or at least, he thinks he knows, what Hannibal's endgame is. He wants Will weak with desperation, but not the same kind Will has felt before.

This is the desperation of a hunter. One that has chased for miles and miles, ravenous and drooling. Will has chased criminals down before, he's even hunted Hannibal, for a time. But those were sprints, not marathons. Will doesn't know how long his stamina will serve him – it is yet one skill he has never had to hone. Patient, he can be, but patience merely requires stillness.

Hannibal will come to him, and Will has to be strong enough to resist.

"I'd like to go for a walk," Will murmurs, rubbing absently at his jaw, over the mating mark on the side of his neck.

Hannibal smiles, and nods. He stands, and holds his hand out for Will. Will takes it because it doesn't occur to him to resist. But then, their palms slide together, their fingers lace, and he doesn't have it in him to pull away. He lets Hannibal bring him to his feet, lets Hannibal tug him close and put his nose in Will's hair.

Will whimpers, and pushes at Hannibal's chest so that they part. It feels like ripping sutures from a wound.

He sees, deep in Hannibal's eyes, a spark of approval. Will flushes, and gathers his shoes and puts them on, and lets Winston and Addy out in front of them as Hannibal dresses for outside, grabs his and Will's coats. They don their coats and step out after the dogs. The air is cool, humid with the promise of a coming storm, and Will breathes in deeply the scent of wet grass and the earthy, heavy scent of mud and gravel from last night's rain.

They decide, as one and with no verbal arrangement, to circle the back yard. It's a large enough space, and Will has kept up with the grass to an acceptable degree, although he still needs to negotiate the weeds and brambles that have overgrown the back fence. He debates waiting until winter, when the plants are easier to cull.

Hannibal walks in step beside him, his hands in the pockets of his coat, idly admiring the verdant greenery of the forest. Will knows he's in Hannibal's periphery, however – the Alpha is always aware.

Will is content in their silence, as he always is, but he knows that they are still playing a game, and he's tempted to see where the rules lie in sharp clarity – where he might be able to bend them, and shape them to reveal Hannibal's intentions.

"Shadow Man," he murmurs, and Hannibal's eyes snap to the side of his face, "when did you first realize you loved me?"

Hannibal smiles, and comes to a halt. Will stops as well, his eyes fixed on his dogs as they trot around the nettles, nosing at each other and the grass, tails wagging wildly.

"When you told me you dreamed of me," Hannibal replies, and Will's eyes snap to him, wide. That long? He wants to ask, and swallows it back. "I found myself realizing, as I read your words, that I was dreaming of you as well. My affection for you ran very deeply, and it certainly wasn't romantic love." Will nods, knowing he was too young for that kind of thing. "Rather, I found myself wanting to protect you, and at the same time, see you flourish."

Will smiles, lopsided and flushed with pleasure. He reaches out, hesitantly, and brushes his hand down Hannibal's arm, before withdrawing and continuing along the perimeter of the field.

Hannibal follows him, a step behind and to his left. It feels like being chased, though it's a tame sensation. Still, it makes Will's shoulders tense up, fighting the urge to rise and shield his neck. He's supposed to be the hunter, in this situation.

But he's always been more of a fisherman.

He lifts his eyes to the storm-grey sky, forces his shoulders to loosen and drop. "Were you there?" he whispers, looking over his shoulder to meet Hannibal's eyes. "When I turned sixteen? When I went into rut?"

Hannibal stops, swallowing harshly. Will blinks, surprised by the reaction, and halts as well, turning to face him fully. He can see Hannibal's pockets bulge, like he's clenching his fists.

"Yes," Hannibal breathes. Will is surprised by the thick shards of red in his irises.

He smiles, and turns away, heading in a straight line towards the house. Hannibal follows, almost silent except for his breathing. The hairs on the back of Will's neck stand up, his heart racing behind his ribs.

"I would have given anything to have you there with me," Will says, knowing Hannibal can hear him. The other Alpha growls, and Will shivers. They approach the back of the house and he turns, and Hannibal crowds him, his hands leaving his pockets and fisting in Will's shirt, shoving him against the siding next to the log pile.

"It was the first time I found my resolve truly tested," Hannibal whispers. His nose brushes against Will's and Will swallows, lifting his chin. Hannibal kisses him, growling softly. He pulls back and puts his teeth by Will's ear, his hands flattening on Will's chest and sliding down. "What would you have done, had I come for you then?"

"Anything," Will breathes, trembling under his mate's touch. "Everything."

Hannibal snarls. He fists a hand in Will's hair and tugs his head to one side, parts his jaws and sucks a pink mark under Will's ear. "And now?"

"Still," Will replies, trembling. His knees are weak, and when Hannibal lets him go and steps back, Will follows him, and falls to his knees in front of his mate. The wet, cold ground seeps into his clothes, makes him shiver, as he parts the halves of Hannibal's coat and tugs at his clothes. His mouth waters, he wants to taste, and touch. He wants Hannibal to look down at him, a hand in his hair, to use his mouth and pull him any way he sees fit.

Hannibal's dark eyes lock with his, his lips parted like he's trying to soak himself in Will's scent. Will whines, unbuttoning and unzipping Hannibal's suit pants when he meets no resistance, when Hannibal doesn't tell him to stop. He pushes the halves apart and pulls Hannibal's cock free through the hole in his underwear. He leans in, licking at the head, and Hannibal shudders, jaw clenching at the heat of his mouth.

Will hesitates. Does this count?

Hannibal snarls again, fists a hand in his hair and plants the other on the side of the house. He tugs Will's mouth down, forces Will's lips to part and sinks his cock into Will's mouth. Will hadn't done this before Hannibal, and the opportunities he's been given have been few, but he knows he's better than he was when they first started, always learning, always trying to improve.

Hannibal's cock slides over his tongue, hits the back of his throat, and Will swallows, clenching his fingers over his thumb and digging his nails into the bunch of Hannibal's pants around the tops of his thighs. He sucks as harshly as he can, cheeks hollowing, and Hannibal shudders.

"Good," he growls, letting go of the siding and sliding his other hand through Will's hair, holding him steady. He plants his feet farther apart and thrusts into Will's mouth, holding him still when he pulls back and does it again. Will moans, taking him eagerly, saliva pooling at the corners of his mouth and running down his chin. His lips are tender and burn at the friction as Hannibal uses him. "You beautiful boy. This is what you want, isn't it?"

And Will has to admit, it is. Part of it, anyway. Alphas aren't supposed to want things like this, they aren't supposed to want to get on their knees and let their mates use and dominate them, but Will has never been an average Alpha, and neither is Hannibal.

He moans, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes and running down his cheeks, reflexively drawn from Hannibal's steady thrusts. He gags when Hannibal fucks in deeply, snarling low in his chest, and Will's fingers tighten, but he doesn't resist. He lets Hannibal hold him there, Will's nose buried in the thatch of hair around the base of his cock. The scent of him is thick and heavy, burning Will's nose and making his lungs seize.

Then, Hannibal pulls out of his mouth and Will gasps, unable to close his mouth quick enough to stop the pool of saliva following, gathered on his tongue. Hannibal hauls him to his feet and shoves him against the wall, drinks the water from Will's mouth and ruts his cock against Will's stomach. Will wraps his fingers around Hannibal's cock, stroking quickly.

"Please," he gasps, hoarse voice cracking on the word. "Please, Alpha. Let me."

Hannibal kisses him again, and pulls back, searching Will's eyes. Will doesn't know what he sees there, but it makes him smile, and nod. His hands are still in Will's hair when Will sinks to his knees again, keeps his eyes raised and parts his bruised lips so that Hannibal can sink into his mouth once more. Hannibal's upper lip curls back, bares his teeth, as he fucks deep into Will's mouth, clogs his throat once, twice, and then he goes still and Will moans, pressing the heel of his hand to his own erection as Hannibal's cock thickens, settles heavy on his tongue, and floods his mouth with his mate's seed.

He swallows as much as he can, but Hannibal tugs on his hair sharply and he gasps, and Hannibal's cock slips from between his lips. His tongue is wet with Hannibal's seed and he looks up, panting heavily. He knows better than to swallow before Hannibal tells him to, understands it like the rustle of leaves in the wake of an approaching gust of wind, knows it like hunger in his gut.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, purring like he always does when he finishes. He lets go with one hand, gathers Will's tears and spit on his thumb, and slides it into Will's mouth. Will's eyelids flutter, his stomach so tense it hurts as he sucks the pad of Hannibal's thumb, accepts it behind his teeth like a racehorse taking the bit. He rubs the heel of his hand against his own erection, desperately trying to quell the raging desire that feels like it's burning him from the inside out.

Hannibal huffs, and pulls his thumb back, and Will whimpers, trapping it between his teeth, curling his tongue around his mate's thumb, unwilling to let go. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and lifts his chin.

"Will," he says, low, his Voice rumbling like an aftereffect of a bomb. Will trembles, and gasps, releasing Hannibal's thumb. As soon as he does, Hannibal gentles, lifting Will to his feet. Will's fingers shake as he touches Hannibal's clothes, adjusting them and straightening them almost on auto-pilot.

Hannibal purrs, and kisses him, tasting the mess he left behind on Will's tongue. "Good boy," he says, petting through Will's hair, soothing the ache.

Will swallows. He doesn't ask for his own relief. He knows that's part of the game.

"I'm hungry," he says instead.

Hannibal smiles. "Then I'll make us some lunch," he replies. "And, perhaps, you will accept wine now."

Will nods. Wine sounds perfect.

"I know what you're trying to do, Shadow Man."

Their meal is over, and Will's stomach is heavy now with both lingering arousal and the satisfaction of hunger well-sated. He nurses a glass of wine, this one smelling of cherries and oranges. It reminds him of Christmas.

Hannibal smiles at him, expectantly.

"You hope to drive me to such desperation that I'll devolve," Will says. "That I'll unravel, like a spree killer."

Hannibal hums, but doesn't deny it. Will's chest is hot, his heart doesn't feel like it will ever slow again. His eyes drop to Hannibal's hand, fingers curled around the stem of his glass. He licks his lips, tasting Hannibal's skin on them.

"Do I conjure such weakness in you?" Will asks.

"Do you have to ask?" Hannibal replies, sitting back in his chair. His cheeks are still flushed from his orgasm, he looks positively feral with satisfaction, that Will has once again solved his puzzle. "Imagine how it felt for me, when you were in my home, so close and yet not close enough. You taunted me with your neck and your scent, teased me by pretending you didn't know who and what I was."

"Ah," Will replies, smiling. "So now you're repaying the favor."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side.

"You see resistance in me," Will continues. "Fear."

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "Though for what, I cannot tell. Perhaps you think I am not ready."

Will's smile softens, and he looks down at his wine, swirling it and admiring the cling of dark color on the pristine edges. It's his second glass, and his head is warm and fuzzing at the edges from the effects of the alcohol. It's stronger than Hannibal's last offering. Perhaps that is by design, as well.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal says, and Will lifts his eyes to meet his mate's. "When I came to you, the night I claimed you, you told me you always imagined us months and years into our relationship." Will swallows, and nods. "How did you imagine our time together to be spent?"

Will swallows, dropping his gaze away, to the fireplace. "Sometimes I imagined that I was younger, that we had been together for some years, but I was still in college." Hannibal nods. "I imagined coming home to you, to a cooked meal and solitude. You would leave me to my own devices, until I was ready to come upstairs. You would undress me, and lay with me. It was..." He pauses, searching for the right word. "Gentle," he finally lands upon.

Hannibal makes a sound, like he's filing that information away. "Is that what you want?" Hannibal asks. "Gentleness?"

"I never know what I want until you touch me," Will confesses. "And every time, it's like you know." He lifts his eyes to Hannibal's again, forces himself to hold his gaze. "I think you know, now. But you're forcing me to admit it. To confess."

"You know how to end this game," Hannibal says mildly. "I'm not forcing you to do anything. But submission can all-too-easily lead to passivity. It is how that fire in you first started to burn out."

Will swallows, nodding, and takes a drink of his wine. His lips are still tender from Hannibal's use, and send a sparkling ricochet of desire up his spine, settling in the base of his neck.

"How different we could have been," he whispers, "had I seen you sooner."

"If it's any consolation, I worked very hard to keep you blind," Hannibal replies. "But I see you, now. And you see me."

"I see you," Will parrots back, nodding again.

Hannibal smiles, and stands. Will sets his wine glass down and tilts his head up, putting his cheek into Hannibal's palm. Hannibal bends down, leans in and catches Will's sore mouth in a tender kiss. He pulls Will to his feet, and wraps a hand around the back of his neck. Will trembles, locking his knees so he doesn't fall to them immediately at the touch.

Hannibal steps back, tugging Will to follow. Will goes, gravitating to his mate as they go upstairs, into the master bedroom. Hannibal closes the door behind them and lets go of Will's neck. Will shivers, fingers curling, and bites his lower lip hard enough that it stings.

Hannibal smiles at him, and nods to Will's clothes. "Let me see you, darling," he murmurs. Will nods, swallowing harshly, and tugs at his clothes, pulling his shirt up and over his head and shoving his sweatpants and underwear down to his ankles before stepping out of them. The air in his room is chill and he shivers, heated from within at Hannibal's gaze. He feels feverish.

Hannibal prowls up to him, circles him slowly like he's admiring a particularly enthralling work of art. "You are beautiful," he murmurs. Will sighs, closing his eyes. Hannibal's fingers trail over his shoulders and Will flinches, tensing at the touch. Then it leaves. He's hyper-aware of Hannibal's heat, his movements, the soft pad of his feet as he circles Will slowly. "I could look upon you every day for the rest of my life and still find you devastating."

Will opens his eyes, turns his head to the side so he can look at Hannibal. But he can't lift his gaze, keeps his eyes focused doggedly on the cling of Hannibal's clothes around his thighs. His mouth waters. "Do you feel proud, when you look at me?" he asks.

"Incredibly," Hannibal replies. He reaches out, drags his knuckles down Will's cheek, curls his nails under Will's chin, and then his touch falls away. Will trembles, trying desperately to remain standing. Hannibal leans in and kisses his shoulder. "Close your eyes."

Will obeys, and hears Hannibal walk away, to the bedside table. The drawer opens, and Will knows he's retrieving lubricant. His body clenches up, anticipatory.

Hannibal touches his shoulders again and Will flinches, whining, but submits to the touch as Hannibal turns him, brings him to a halt at the end of the bed and has him bend forward, so his hands settle on the sheets, fingers curling in them and tugging for something to grab onto.

Hannibal stands behind him, sets the bottle down by Will's knee on the bed. His hands cup Will's hips, encouraging him to rear back so his legs straighten. His hands slide down, tugging Will back so that Will can feel Hannibal's clothed erection against his ass. He whimpers and fights the urge to sink to his elbows.

Hannibal's snarl fills the air, and Will trembles when Hannibal bends over him, sets his weight against Will's back and nuzzles his curling hair, where sweat is making it stick to his neck despite the chill of the room. "Tell me what you want," he commands, and Will gasps when he hears his mate's Voice, compelling him to obey.

He can't resist. He doesn't want to. "I want you to mount me," he whispers, ragged and low.

Hannibal hums, kissing Will's bared shoulder. "You already know I will," he growls, Voice sitting heavy on Will's neck. Will trembles, thighs tensing up as Hannibal's hands curl around the tender insides, where he's sensitive and soft. His nails dig in and rake thin red lines across his skin.

And Will does know – Hannibal's needs are perfectly matched to his own, equals and opposites. Still, it's so hard – so hard to ask when he knows his mate can read him so well. What's the purpose of saying it out loud, if the only gain is the pleasure of hearing it spoken?

But Shadow Man is asking, and Will's role as daydreamer is to answer;

"I want you to take care of me."

The sound Hannibal makes is low and pleased. He wraps a hand around Will's cock in reward, stroking gently. Will bites back a whimper, hips rutting forward like he has an Omega or woman pinned beneath him, wet and wanting. Hannibal drags his teeth down Will's spine and Will arches into the touch, tugging at the sheets with another desperate growl.

"Please," he whines, trembling in Hannibal's hold. Hannibal drags his hands back, flattens them on Will's ass, spreads him out as Hannibal ruts his clothed cock against his bared flesh. "Please, mount me."

"I will, darling," Hannibal replies, breathy and soft against Will's back. Will clenches his eyes and jaw tightly when he feels Hannibal's touch retreat, the other Alpha tugging at his clothes to free his cock. Hannibal grabs the bottle of lubricant, opens it with a quiet *snick*, and Will trembles as wet fingers slide between his legs, drag across his hole to get him wet. His breath escapes him in a punched-out gasp as Hannibal pushes inside him with one finger, thrusting in as deeply as he can until the webbing of his fingers stops him going any further.

"*God*," Will moans, head sinking low between his shoulders, baring the back of his neck. His cock aches, hanging hard and leaking between his thighs. He clenches up around Hannibal's finger, whining when Hannibal's free hand flattens on his spine, forcing him to remain still and open as he works another finger inside. It stings, Will isn't an Omega and can't get wet like one, but he arches back and begs for it like the best of that breed, desperate for his mate to mount and knot and fill him.

Hannibal's fingers curl, pressing down on that sensitive spot inside him, and Will howls. "*Fuck*," he snarls, lets go of the bed with one hand to tug on his hair, the sharp point of pain keeping him from falling over the edge too soon. "*Yes, d-. God damn it.*"

Hannibal growls, and Will trembles when he hears his mate's displeasure – like he knows what Will was going to say, and knows he bit it back. He fucks in with his fingers as though in punishment, nails of his free hand digging deeply into Will's back.

"Please," Will begs, turning his head to bite at his tense bicep, tugging at his hair.

"Tell me what you want," Hannibal growls. Will moans when Hannibal presses close, his cock smearing sticky-wet on Will's thigh. If Will was an Omega, he'd be slick down to his knees, aching with the need to be filled, but he feels that ache in his stomach, in a way he's sure other Alphas don't – the way other Alphas aren't supposed to.

Will whines. He can't, he *can't*. He can't say it out loud. Hannibal pulls his fingers out and snarls, reaches forward and wraps his hand in Will's hair, between his own fingers, and hauls

him upright. Will gasps, leaning heavy against Hannibal's chest, his head on his mate's shoulder.

"Tell me, darling," Hannibal says, purring rough in Will's ear.

Will whimpers, and shivers when Hannibal puts his free hand low on Will's stomach. Will swallows, his mouth dry.

"Address me by name, and I'll stop," Hannibal says after another knife-edged moment of silence.

Will shakes his head, blinking slowly at the ceiling. He can't help thinking that having Hannibal stop would be worse than any flush of shame, any heat of embarrassment he could feel. He turns his head and Hannibal kisses him, gentles his hand in Will's hair, cradles his jaw.

"Ask me again," Will breathes, mouth tender on Hannibal's.

Hannibal smiles. "What do you want, darling?"

Will sucks in a breath, and turns in Hannibal's arms. He kisses his mate again, deeply, just to hear Hannibal growl, and drags his nails down Hannibal's chest.

"Mount me," he demands, and speaks lowly, his Voice echoing below his words. Hannibal's pupils flare out wide, covering his iris until only a thin ring of red remains. "Consume me, in my entirety."

Hannibal snarls, but he can't fight Will's Voice any better than Will could fight his. He lunges for Will, pins him down on the mattress, his teeth bared against Will's tender mouth, claws curling and digging around his ribs.

Will spreads his legs, gasping as Hannibal ruts his cock against Will's, pressed tight between their stomachs. The friction is terrible for how much Will likes it, needs it, desperation welling up in his throat and spilling forth in a desperate whine.

Hannibal snarls, rearing back, and rolls Will onto his hands and knees. Will barely has time to ground himself, planted firm on the mattress, before Hannibal wraps a hand around his cock and presses against Will's hole, sinking inside. Will howls, head thrown back as Hannibal fucks into him brutally, not giving his body time to adjust.

"Yes," Will gasps, turns his head and accepts the harsh bite Hannibal plants to his jaw. He brings his wrists together like they're bound, tenses his shoulders and lifts his hips to collide with his mate. Hannibal thrusts deeply, his clothes rubbing harshly against Will's bare, sweaty back. Hannibal sinks his teeth into Will's throat and wraps his hands around Will's shoulders, like he wants to haul Will back, force himself deeper into the place no one else has touched.

"Please, Alpha," Will moans, head dropping forward as Hannibal fucks him. It's rough and fast, and Will's entire body is singing for him, spine hot and liquified, thighs burning with the effort it's taking to keep himself upright. Hannibal snarls, drags his nails down Will's flanks,

flattens his hands on Will's ass and kneels up so he's fucking Will like he might an Omega, driving into him with punishing force. Will bows his shoulders, the instinct to fall into the classic mounting position overwhelming him. He gasps against the sheets, unable to draw in enough air before Hannibal fucks it out of him. "Please, *please*, fuck me."

The sound of their bodies colliding is slick, obscene. Hannibal's scent stings Will's nose, sharp with salt and sweat. He bows his back down, spine dipped and neck bared.

"That's it," Hannibal says, like the words escape him before he can stop them. Hannibal plants his hands on Will's shoulders, keeping him down, his nails sharp in Will's skin like he wants to tear.

Will whimpers, and reaches below his stomach with one hand, takes a hold of his cock and wraps his fingers tight around the base in an attempt to quell the rising heat in his stomach. He doesn't want to finish, not yet.

But the restraint in his stomach frees his tongue. He finds himself breathing, before he can stop himself; "Breed me, Alpha."

Hannibal's rhythm stutters, half surprise and half sudden, sharp arousal. Will cries out weakly as Hannibal collapses over him, parts his jaws and sinks his teeth into Will's shoulder, breaking skin. The scent of his blood explodes in the air and Will trembles, breath catching as Hannibal fucks into him.

Hannibal's teeth withdraw, and he licks Will's neck, bites the sweaty corner of his jaw. "Is that what you want?" he asks. He doesn't sound like himself – he sounds like a predator, a monster, and the creature in Will's chest is purring and arching its back in answer.

Will whimpers, bites his lower lip, and nods. It's too late to take it back, and there's no room for shame when his brain is on fire and every cell in him is lit up under his mate's burning hands. Will can't get pregnant, as an Alpha, but it's alright to pretend. He repeats it to himself like a mantra – he can pretend. Hannibal isn't pulling away from him.

"Yes," he growls, turning his head to nuzzle Hannibal's jaw. Hannibal's upper lip curls back as he kisses Will, sharing the taste of Will's blood between them. "I want you to knot me, fill me up until I burst for you."

Hannibal's snarl is loud, powerful in his chest. He sinks to his knees behind Will and yanks him back by the hips, forcing Will to mold to his body, kneel still and trembling as Hannibal fucks in, hips jerking to tease at his knot and force it to swell. Will clenches down, hissing as Hannibal's knot swells up, locking them tightly together.

Hannibal shudders, his eyes falling closed, and he nuzzles Will's bitten flesh, licks over the steadily-seeping wound. Will trembles, hand tight on his cock to stop himself finishing as well. Hannibal hasn't said he could.

Hannibal growls, slides his hand under Will's stomach and bats his hand away, taking over. Will moans, clenching his jaw. "When I think you can't get any more beautiful," he whispers against Will's hair. He hauls Will upright, so Will is kneeling on his lap, and Will growls,

curling up tightly so he doesn't tug painfully on Hannibal's knot. He's warm and heavy with Hannibal's seed, feels every time Hannibal's cock twitches and spills inside him.

His cheeks are red, both from sex and from shame. "I don't want to talk about it," he murmurs, trembling when Hannibal's hand tightens on his cock, gathers the slip of wetness at the head and spreads it down. It feels good, too good, Will's stomach tenses as he tries to keep a hold of himself. He has to resist – he can't succumb.

Hannibal calls to him, can use him, and Will wonders if his own behavior as a youth was so devastating. With every letter, every absent smile to a crowd, did Shadow Man feel so desperate? Did he touch himself, thinking of Will in rut, or older, at eighteen, at twenty-one, flushed and legal in all ways?

Hannibal is purring, and kisses Will's shoulder, his free hand wrapped around Will's chest to keep him upright as he keeps touching Will. Will's ass clenches up tightly, hips jerking to test the seal of Hannibal's knot. His mouth is dry, and he wants, when Hannibal pulls out, for his mate to take his seed and smear it along Will's tongue. He's sure it would sate his thirst like nothing else.

Hannibal doesn't reply immediately. His hand is idle on Will's sensitive flesh, and Will whimpers, biting the knuckles of his own hand as he feels the heat in his stomach plummet, get urgent and harsh. He reaches down and wraps his hand around Hannibal's, forcing him to stop.

"Don't," he whispers, barely manages to get the word out.

Hannibal releases him immediately, flattens his slick hand on Will's lower stomach. Will is so hard it hurts, sharply in him like a knife wound, but he must resist. He has to control himself – he knows that's what Hannibal is seeking. To pull him so tight, wind him up so much, that he snaps.

"This is how it felt," Will breathes, stuttering the words, "when you played for me. The first time."

Hannibal growls. He pushes at Will's shoulders, forcing him onto his stomach so Hannibal can cover him, lay over him like Will has said he fantasized about. He nuzzles Will's sweaty hair and Will whimpers, fucking against the mattress in juddering thrusts that give him only a paltry sense of relief.

"The number of hours I spent on that piece," Hannibal whispers, and Will knows. Twenty-seven years is a long time. "The moment you finally heard it, I was elated to the bone. I knew there would be no future I could accept that did not have you in it." He pets down Will's flanks, rolls his hips so his knot teases at the sensitive spot inside of Will, and Will gasps, closing his eyes and baring his neck when Hannibal kisses him there. "You gave me your tears," he breathes. "You gave me your heart."

"And you showed me your hand," Will replies. "Now, you want that position reversed."

Hannibal nods, sighing, and kisses Will's red neck again. "The difference being, my daydreamer, that you have everything of me that I can offer."

"I know," Will whispers, sighing. He turns his head further, so he can kiss Hannibal's cheek, lick at the smear of blood on the corner of his mouth.

Hannibal kisses him, chaste and gentle, and then his knot deflates, and he pulls out. Will whines, unable to stop his hips lifting in a desperate, bone-deep desire to keep everything inside of him, and he trembles when his body tightens instinctively, and Hannibal's seed leaks out, staining his thighs.

Hannibal growls, leans down and spreads Will apart. Will gasps, shoulders tensing as Hannibal flattens his tongue, wet and wide over his hole, licking him clean. He pushes himself upright and Will rolls, sitting up and catching Hannibal at his neck and through his hair. He parts his lips and accepts Hannibal's tongue between his teeth, licking the mess from his mate. It's sharp and sweet, a wonderful counterpoint to Will's blood.

Hannibal growls, lunges for Will and pins him down, deepening the kiss with his hands at Will's wrists, forcing his touch away and planting his hands on the bed. He straddles Will's hips and Will moans, roughly, as his cock is trapped under the seat of Hannibal's pants, still clinging to his thighs. The pressure and friction of the material is almost painful and Will whimpers against his mate's mouth, fingers curling tight enough his knuckles go white.

"Shadow Man," he whispers, and Hannibal snarls, but pulls back. His eyes are calming, darkening to their normal color. Will's head feels hot, his teeth itch. He licks his lips and whines. "Mercy."

Hannibal blinks down at him, and gentles his hands immediately. He cups Will's face and leans in, kisses his bruised lips as gently as he can manage, feather-light and warm. "My beautiful boy," he whispers, and Will shivers, chest tightening around his sharp inhale. The heat behind his eyes sparks, flares like a firework's shadow.

He whines, and rolls his wrists, forcing Hannibal to release him. He rears up, catches Hannibal and rolls them, until he's settled between Hannibal's legs and he kisses his mate, harshly, lapping kitten-like at the blood on his lips.

"And you're mine," he purrs, not sure where the sudden aggression is coming from, only that it's there.

Hannibal smiles, cradling Will close. He digs his nails into Will's lower back, and Will shivers as his cock drags along Hannibal's shirt, dirtying it, staining it. He likes the idea – a lot. He growls and nuzzles Hannibal's jaw, licks over his throat, and plants his hands on Hannibal's chest, rolling his hips to chase the tease of pressure.

Hannibal wraps a hand in Will's hair, pulls him into a kiss and sits up, back against the wall. Will crawls closer between his thighs, lifts onto his knees and shivers when the movement causes more of Hannibal's seed to leak out of him, smearing between his legs. He moans against Hannibal's mouth and forces himself to pull away.

Resist.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, eyes dark with amusement, smile off-kilter and smug. Will bites his lower lip, rolls his shoulders, and fights the urge to return to his mate with all his might.

He stands, and fetches his clothes, redressing himself quickly. By the time he's done, Hannibal is similarly decent, but still sitting on the bed, lazy and fucked-out. Will's lips twitch at the corners, eyeing the pretty flush high on Hannibal's cheeks, breathes in the scent of sweat and sex lingering in the air like dust.

Will runs both hands through his hair, wincing when his bitten skin tugs and aches sharply. He's torn between leaving the room, fleeing downstairs to the open floor and the garish sunlight and the promise of wine to loosen his tongue and soothe his nerves, and his mate, who can do just as much.

He bites his lower lip, swallows, and manages to put his eyes somewhere next to Hannibal's feet. "I don't wish I was Omega," he says, hating how defensive he sounds.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "I never suggested you did."

Will's head warms, his cheeks darken. Just as he knew it would, the familiar shame is crawling up his spine, burrowing into his skull and finding its familiar nest in Will's brain. It cools the fires of lingering arousal, makes his chest feel cold and tight.

"I could have been a father," he says. "I could have dated. Could have bitten and mounted an Omega of my own."

Hannibal doesn't make a sound, but the air gets tense and thick, like it does the moment before a tiger lunges.

"I didn't," he finishes. "Because I didn't want to."

Hannibal hums, sitting forward so his elbows are on his knees. His legs cross on the bed and Will's eyes are forced to follow his feet, until he reaches Hannibal's eyes. They're calculating, observing things Will doesn't want him to see. Things he is afraid of revealing.

"Because of me?" Hannibal asks.

Will swallows. "I don't know," he replies, dropping his gaze. It's strange – since he's standing, he's arguably in the more physically dominant position, but he feels laid low, vulnerable under the weight of Hannibal's stare. "I was in love with you before I knew who you were. But had you been female, or Omega, I don't know if I would still..." He clears his throat, looks away.

"You would rather be chaste, than be in a pairing that could provide children."

Will huffs. "I know better than to breed," he says coldly.

Hannibal frowns, blinking at him once. He laces his fingers together and sets his chin on top of them. "But you would," he says quietly. "If you could bear my children, you would."

Will winces, folding his arms across his chest.

"Because you know I would take care of you."

Will bares his teeth; a warning.

Hannibal smiles. "It is not a weakness, darling," he purrs. Will shakes his head and looks down at his feet, shoulders tensed and raised to shield his neck. He hears Hannibal getting to his feet, and goes still as Hannibal circles him, presses up tight to his back and smooths his hands down Will's arms.

He kisses Will's neck, and gently coaxes Will's fingers from his own flesh, forcing him to relax. "What is at the end of a rainbow, daydreamer?"

Will licks his lips, shivering. "A 'W'."

Hannibal smiles. "But that's not what you first said, is it?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "I thought it was a pot of gold," he replies.

"Sometimes, we run the risk of overthinking situations," Hannibal whispers. His thumb brushes tenderly over the old welts on Will's wrist. Will's fingers twitch and he looks down at his wrist, admires the darker curl of Hannibal's skin against the bared whiteness of his arm, the old purple-red wounds Will inflicted by snapping rubber bands. "At the cost of our well-being."

"You think I'm overthinking this," Will murmurs.

Hannibal smiles, and turns Will in his arms. He nuzzles Will gently, their noses brushing, and rests their foreheads together. "We are both men, gifted with the ability to see into the minds of others," he says. Will nods. "So, too, are we cursed to bear this burden. You believe I will overthink your needs and wants, and you are so busy worrying about what I think, that you leave no room within yourself to express or acknowledge your desires."

"My desires," Will bites back, sharply, "are not natural."

"Says who?" Hannibal replies mildly. "Your mother, or your uncle? Your friends? The little voice in your head we call a conscience?"

Will doesn't answer.

"I ask you, darling," Hannibal murmurs, cupping Will's face, "which of these forces are you hurting, by letting me take care of you?"

Will swallows, meeting Hannibal's gaze, and finds that he cannot reply. Hannibal presses his lips together, brushing his fingers gently over Will's face.

Then, his phone rings from downstairs. Will frowns, turning towards the sound, and Hannibal sighs, leading the way out of the bedroom and down to the living room. Winston and Addy

are sitting at the dining room table, nosing curiously at the edge. On top of it, Hannibal's phone sits, screen flashing and the device vibrating along the top with a harsh noise.

He picks it up, frowning, and gives Will an apologetic look before he answers it. "Good afternoon, this is Doctor Lecter," he says.

Will swallows, and retrieves his wine glass. He goes back upstairs, sipping idly, and puts the lubricant bottle back in place, opens the windows, fixes the sheets. By the time Hannibal joins him upstairs, his wine glass is empty, and the room smells like the outside air.

Will is standing by the window. He turns his head, but not his body, catching Hannibal's shadow out of his periphery. "You have to leave?" he asks.

Hannibal sighs. That's all Will needs to hear. He runs a hand over the back of his neck, scratching absently at where his sweat is drying and starting to itch.

"I won't be gone long," Hannibal says.

Will nods, and wonders if it's petulant to mention that, even with good traffic, and even if Hannibal were to resolve whatever issue is calling him back to Baltimore within a second, he would still be gone for at least two hours, closer to three.

Will is silent, and doesn't hear Hannibal leaving. Hannibal sighs again, and his warmth touches Will's side. Will turns his head, meeting his mate's eyes.

"Will," Hannibal begins, and stops.

Will smiles. "This is how I left you," he says, and nods to the outdoors. "Did you watch me leave? After you played for me."

"No," Hannibal replies. Will raises an eyebrow, and looks to him again. "My strength had finally run out. I could not have handled seeing you run from me when I finally had you close enough to touch. I would have chased you."

"But you didn't," Will says. "You made me wait another week."

Hannibal nods. "And how long will you make me wait, daydreamer?"

Will frowns, but doesn't reply. Hannibal sighs, kisses his cheek, and nuzzles his hair, breathing deep like he's savoring Will's scent, knowing it must last for a long time. Then, he leaves, and shuts the door behind him. Will clenches his fingers on the windowsill, forcing himself to keep his gaze fixed outwards, towards the tree line. Not on the road. Not on the car. Not on his mate as Hannibal leaves.

Will sleeps fitfully that night. His chest feels too tight, his head hurts and his jaw aches from clenching it in frustration. Normally, when he would get like this, he could find solace in

being alone, in writing letters to Shadow Man and knowing he would receive affectionate, wise words in return. But he can't do that now, not when the man himself is the source of Will's anger.

And it is anger. How *dare* Hannibal leave, like Will is uninteresting, un-engaging, with his heart spilled on the floor and the walls around his head turning see-through? How dare he touch Will, use him like that, give him just a sliver of the things he wanted, and hint at being able to give more, and then turn around and abandon him?

Will snarls, paces down to his living room, up again. His bedroom stinks too much of Hannibal to settle him, but the rest of his house is no better. He lights a fire and opens up every window, wants to burn the scent of his mate away so that his head is clear. He debates pouring the wine out and turning to whiskey instead, but he doesn't. He drinks it, first the elderflower bottle Hannibal left, and then the cherry-orange brew that is more recent.

When he's fittingly drunk, he pulls a notebook from his shelves and tosses it open on his table, slumps in his seat and takes a pen from his bag.

"Shadow Man," he begins, and stares at the page. He growls, sitting back, and drinks another large mouthful of wine, almost draining the glass. He hisses through his teeth at the sharp aftertaste, and sets the glass down.

"Why?" he wants to write. He does, and then crosses it out. "Fuck you," he wants to add. That doesn't make it onto the page.

He throws his pen down, puts his head in his hands, and sighs.

"You're overthinking," he tells himself. His fingers curl in his hair and he wants to dig out his box of rubber bands. He would, if he didn't know Hannibal would never forgive him if he did. "You're overthinking. *Stop it.*"

He swallows, and closes his eyes.

He thinks back to the conversation that started this game. The topic of shame, of Will's petulant and childish jealousy at the thought of not being at Hannibal's side at all times. Even still, the fact that Hannibal did not accuse him of such low emotions, merely acknowledged that Will was feeling them when he admitted it. Just like the fact that he doesn't want to return to Baltimore, and yet the longing is there, because that is where Hannibal is – Hannibal is not manipulating the world and telling Will it is so. The world is so, and Hannibal wants Will to see it.

Hannibal had asked him why he can't share his thoughts with his mate. And in the same action, Will admitted that he feels the absence of opportunity, every time Hannibal is gone. He could know his mate from the inside out, could know everything about him, had he been given the chance to learn and absorb sooner.

"Ah," a voice whispers to him, and it sounds like Hannibal's, "but would that not have shaped you in turn? He gave you free will, left you the chance to mold yourself into what you are, deviance and all."

Will presses his lips together, breathing out harshly through his nose. His eyes jump to the fireplace, where the flames arch up, bright and happy like dancing children.

He sees, in them, the heat in Hannibal's eyes, when he'd held Will by the hair and asked him what he wanted.

He closes his eyes, and trembles, heat flaring up in his head. It feels like pressure, like a headache but sharper, sitting in his skull like there's someone touching his brain, shoving it forward to make room for something dark and curling. Smoke, spices – cinnamon. His hands shake and his gut clenches, and he digs his nails into the back of his neck to try and calm himself down.

He opens his eyes, reaches for the wine glass and empties it into his mouth. The action reminds him of how Hannibal tasted on his tongue and he flinches, sets the glass down before he can break it. He whimpers, trembling. He's sweating, even though he's not close enough to the fire to overheat. His eyes prickle and itch, dry no matter how much he blinks.

"Shadow Man," he whispers. "Why did you leave?"

"Because, my daydreamer, I wanted to see if you would follow."

Will frowns. That's not right.

"Shadow Man. Why did you leave?"

"You left me. I wanted you to know what that felt like."

Closer, but still not *quite*.

"Shadow Man." Will's voice is hoarse, growling and thick in his throat. His teeth itch, his mouth watering. He stands, suddenly unable to bear the thought of sitting for a second longer. His stomach tenses suddenly as he paces to the stairs, and he falls to his knees with a gasp. His claws dig into the wood of the stairs and he arches his back like he's going to be sick. "Why did you leave?"

"You beautiful boy. This is what you want, isn't it?"

Will whimpers, clawing at his neck. His throat feels too tight, like there's a creature there trying to escape. His stomach tenses, his thighs ache. His head feels so heavy, he can't hold it up – presses his forehead to the stairs and smears his sweat along them.

Scent-marking. Claiming his territory.

The heat in his head suddenly expands, flows down his back, settles like water pooling in his stomach, and Will gasps, hips jerking forward as his cock hardens so suddenly and insistently that he feels dizzy with it.

"Please," he moans, clenching his eyes tightly shut. "Shadow Man -."

"You're overthinking again, darling."

Will snarls, but clarity slams into the backs of his eyes as suddenly as a hit-and-run. He turns around, sprawls along the stairs, and reaches into the pocket of his lounge pants, pulling out his phone. His vision is blurred, too red to see, and his hands shake, but he only has two phone numbers programmed into his phone, and only one of them on speed-dial.

His mate picks up on the second ring.

"Hannibal," Will breathes, trembling when Hannibal growls. He loses the fight with his own will and presses the heel of his free hand against his erection, arching into the touch even though it makes his shoulders ache, flat as they are against the unforgiving surface of the stairs. "Something's wrong."

He knows what this is – he hasn't felt it since he was sixteen, but he knows. Rut. Hannibal triggered a rut in him.

"Are you safe?" Hannibal asks. Will can hear him moving, hear the rush of wind, a door closing, fast footsteps as Hannibal hurries to his car.

Will whimpers, and nods though Hannibal can't see him. He slides his hand under the waistband of his pants and takes his cock in a tight grip. "Hannibal," he says again – the game is over. Will lost. That was the whole point, wasn't it? "Please."

"I'm on my way, darling," Hannibal replies. Will barely hears his voice over the roar of blood in his ears. "Are you safe?"

"Yes," Will replies, jaw clenching as pleasure rears its head in his chest, bares its fangs and sinks into his heart. "Please, hurry." He hears Hannibal's car start, hears a soft chorus of violins before Hannibal turns the music off. He yanks his pants down to his knees, glad that the dogs are sealed in the kitchen, and kicks his clothes down to the bottom of the stairs. His cock is red and leaking, flesh dark as it slips between Will's white knuckles.

It barely takes more than a touch before his orgasm tightens in his stomach, too-long denied in the presence of its mate and too far into the charge to stop now. Will whimpers, breathing raggedly into the phone as he spills over his hand and his shirt, he rolls onto his elbows and knees on the stairs, tugging sharply at the half-swell of his knot in an instinct he can't fight, chasing something tight and hot and wet to sink into.

He hears Hannibal growling, and sucks in a harsh lungful of air, plants his dirty hand flat on the floor to spread his scent.

"Shadow Man," he breathes. "Come take care of me."

"I will," Hannibal replies. Will swallows, hangs up the call and tosses his phone in the vague direction of the couch.

By the time he sees Hannibal's headlights spear the darkness, Will is naked, a shaking mess at the bottom of his stairs. His hand is wet with seed, spilled thick and heavy onto his knees and thighs. He's dripping with sweat, red-eyed and baring his teeth. He knows the house reeks of his rut, cinnamon and cherries dragging over the palette at the roof of his mouth.

He whimpers, drags his wet fingers down to the bulge of his half-formed knot at the base of his cock. It swelled with Will's first orgasm and hasn't gone down since. It won't until time renders him too tired to continue. Ruts last twenty-four hours unless there's an Omega to provide the hormonal jumpstart to keep it going, Will knows that absently like he knows the names of the Presidents and knows the directions of the compass and knows the scent of Alana's perfume, but that doesn't make it any easier to bear.

The door opens, and Will raises his head, meets Hannibal's dark red eyes. He whines, bares his teeth, and Hannibal closes the door behind him. He maintains his distance, breathing shallowly, and sheds his coat, his shoes, and his suit jacket.

Will watches, wide-eyed and rapt at the sight of his mate undressing. He's ravenous, saliva pooling in his mouth as Hannibal's salted caramel scent reaches him, blown in from the open windows. He whimpers. Hannibal isn't coming to him, but Will can't stand.

He lets go of his cock, hissing when his body protests the absence of something tight and warm around his knot, and crawls to his mate. He reaches Hannibal as Hannibal unbuttons and shrugs off his shirt, and pulls his undershirt over his head, baring his chest.

Will nuzzles Hannibal's thigh, parts his jaws and sinks his teeth dully through the material. Hannibal growls at him, almost like a warning, but Will is in no position to resist what his body demands of him. In no position to deny himself what he wants.

What he wants is Hannibal.

Hannibal cups his jaw, tilts his head up, and Will whimpers. He brings his hand back to his cock, unable to stop himself. He's sure he's soaked with the scent of his rut, and Hannibal, as an Alpha, should be repulsed by it. But Will cannot see anything on Hannibal's face except pure, feral desire. The red in his eyes is beautiful, burns Will where he stands.

"I surrender," Will breathes, kneeling up so he can kiss the words onto Hannibal's bared stomach. Hannibal shivers, fingers curling under Will's jaw. "I'll be good. I swear I'll be good."

"Oh, darling, I know" Hannibal whispers, and kneels down, his other hand joining the first and holding Will's face. He brushes his thumbs along the corners of Will's mouth, his expression gentle and overjoyed. "My sweet, beautiful boy."

Will trembles, eyes and mouth wet. He aches, deep inside, desperate.

He wants to speak. Wants to break down that last shred of resistance, wants to bare the last piece of himself he has kept back. He wants to, but his tongue feels heavy, his words run dry.

Hannibal smiles at him, and reaches down, gently taking Will's hand from his cock. Will trembles, licking his lips, jaws parting as Hannibal pulls Will's knuckles to his face, turns his head and kisses Will's dirty hand, breathing in deeply. Will feels the walls crumbling.

Then, Hannibal forces Will's fingers apart, and licks between them, and Will shatters like water on a cliffside.

"Please, daddy," he says, so quietly it doesn't feel like sound, but it guts him and shreds him to pieces and Hannibal's eyes snap to him, wild and so darkly pleased that Will doesn't have room in him to feel shame. "I want you to take care of me."

Hannibal smiles, and it shows his teeth. He stands, hauling Will up onto shaky legs. He's coltish, unsteady, too slick with sweat to really hold but Hannibal's hands sink into his flesh, and he kisses Will, cups his thighs and lifts Will onto the dining room table.

Will moans, spreading his legs and dragging his claws down Hannibal's chest. He finds Hannibal's belt, tugs savagely, so close to getting what he wants, too desperate and high off of rut to be embarrassed by how desperately he wants his mate.

Hannibal growls and Will, aggressive and feral, snarls back, baring his teeth. He tugs at Hannibal's belt, too uncoordinated to negotiate the buckle properly, and growls in frustration.

"Will," Hannibal says. His Voice is powerful, a whiplash on Will's enflamed senses. He goes still, abruptly, and Hannibal lifts his chin when their eyes meet. "Hands by your sides."

Will swallows, and obeys. He doesn't look away as Hannibal unbuckles his belt, pulls it loose and gathers it in his hands. Then, after a moment, he steps close between Will's thighs and wraps it around Will's waist. He pulls it tight and fastens it, leaving just enough room that his fingers can curl around it, knuckles rough on Will's sweaty skin.

A handhold. If Will wasn't already sitting, he'd collapse.

He trembles, whining when Hannibal leans in and kisses his sweat-slick neck, licks over the first mating bite he placed, the scar raised and white. "Please," he whispers, fingers curling on the edge of the table.

Hannibal growls, parts his jaws and bites down and Will moans, voice cracking. Some of part of him that's wild and savage wants to claw at the other Alpha, fight off the bite to his neck, the threat of another predator in front of him, but that part is small and easily overcome. He wraps his legs around Hannibal's thighs, drags him closer.

Hannibal growls, plants his hands on Will's hips, and bites down harder. He splits skin, and Will shivers as he feels his blood drip slickly down his neck, pool at his collarbone. He turns his head, nudges Hannibal's neck in return until Hannibal lifts his head, and catches his mouth in a kiss, licking his teeth clean.

Hannibal growls, and his fingers deftly unbutton and unzip his suit pants, pushing them with his underwear down to his knees. He steps back, steps out of them, so he's as bare as Will is.

Will's breath catches at the sight of him, strong and fine. He doesn't know how any female or Omega could compare.

He spreads his legs and lets Hannibal come back to him, jerks his shoulders as he tries to reach out, to touch, but Hannibal's command keeps his hands in place.

Hannibal kisses him, too soft, too chaste, and he pulls back before Will can bite. Will growls, and Hannibal smiles. "How does it feel?" he asks, low and wanting. His hands slide up the outside of Will's shaking thighs, flat and warm even with how fever-hot Will is burning.

Will shakes his head, bares his neck. "I need you," he breathes. "So badly I don't care how I get you." *Our positions are reversed again, and everything is right in the world.*

Hannibal's smile widens, showing his teeth. His hands find the belt around Will's waist, tighten and tug him to the edge of the table. Will's thighs tense, he lifts his legs to wrap around Hannibal again, arching as much as he's able.

Hannibal's cock sinks between his thighs and Will snarls when Hannibal shivers, able to feel where Will is open and slick, Hannibal's seed, and Will's, and his saliva and fingers worked him open, made him wet and wanting. Hannibal's hips roll, his cockhead pushes against Will's hole and sinks in just an inch. It burns, aches, Will isn't made to take so much inside of him especially after being knotted so recently, but he'll be damned if he makes Hannibal stop now.

"Please," Will says, his nose at Hannibal's neck. He wants to touch, to claw, but his hands remain where they are. Hannibal's fingers tighten around the belt, and tug. Will licks his lips, kisses Hannibal's jaw, drags his mouth open and wet to Hannibal's ear, and he growls, using his Voice; "Take care of me, daddy. Make me feel good."

Hannibal snarls, and slams deep like he can't help himself. Will gasps, shoving his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder as the other Alpha growls, low in his chest, trembles at the feeling of Will's tight, rut-hot body clenching desperately around him. Will whines, knuckles white, and rolls his hips, caging Hannibal in with his thighs, ankles tucked behind Hannibal's knees.

Hannibal takes one hand from the belt, wraps it in Will's hair and yanks him back, kisses him with blistering heat and Will trembles, body clenching, arching. His orgasm whites out his vision and he shudders, spine curling him up and against his mate as he spills weakly between their bellies. After so long in rut, his body produces little, but the orgasm is just as powerful at the first and makes his breath stutter.

Hannibal pulls back, fucks in again. "Perfect," he growls. "You're perfect." He kisses Will again, twists his hand in the belt until it digs into Will's red flesh, hauls him close and builds up a punishing rhythm that makes the table creak in protest. Will is sensitive after his orgasm, whimpering desperately against Hannibal's blood-slick mouth.

But he doesn't ask for mercy, doesn't ask to stop. The opposite, in fact.

"Harder," he demands, presses his nose and forehead against his mate's and shows his teeth. He can't stop using his Voice, delights in how much Hannibal is a slave to it, how his shoulders tense, his skin shines with Will's sweat and his own in the firelight. The flames paint them in gold, a monument to raw desire and savage need, Alphas in their prime taking what they want from each other in the same kind of perfect counter-momentum that changes the course of tides.

Hannibal moans, his rhythm faltering when Will bites his jaw. "Come on," Will whispers, too hoarse to keep using his Voice but Hannibal reacts like he still is, breathing hard and slack-mouthed against Will's cheek. "That's it. You got what you wanted, didn't you? I'm here, I'm yours. Take me."

"*Will*," Hannibal snarls, lets go of the belt and settles his hands over Will's, presses down tight enough to hurt his palms where the table cuts into them. Will growls, drinking in the obscene, slick sounds of their bodies colliding; the punched-out, ragged breaths as they escape Hannibal's throat; the rough snarl gathering volume and speed like an oncoming storm, ready to sweep them both away.

"Yes, *fuck*," Will breathes. He can feel it, feel Hannibal's claws sharpen and dig into his wrists, feel the way his heartbeat stutters under Will's mouth. He drags his lips to the soft flesh of Hannibal's throat, finds where he laid that first mark so many months ago.

"Will," Hannibal says again. Weak. Desperate.

He starts to slow, and Will purrs, parting his jaws and sucking a dark red mark just shy of the original bite. "You want me," he whispers, and although it's not a question, Hannibal nods, helplessly. "Want me full of you, nothing else. Want me down to my foundations." Hannibal makes another weak sound, thrusting deep. "Prove it."

Hannibal whines, and Will has never heard him do that before. It's a sweet, placative noise, as he digs his nails around Will's wrists and fucks in, and goes still. He shivers and Will closes his eyes, sinks his teeth into Hannibal's neck as Hannibal's knot swells inside of him. It aches, tender muscles forced to spread and part for Hannibal, but Will takes it without complaint. With relief.

He sighs, satisfied to the bone. His rut will likely continue for the allotted time, but he's sated by Hannibal's scent in his nose, his blood in Will's mouth. The way Hannibal shakes for him, he might be the one desperate with need, shivery and weak in Will's arms.

Hannibal releases his hands, and the command fades away. Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, purring in harmony to his mate's. He nuzzles Hannibal's sweaty jaw, kisses the corner of his mouth, and pulls back to meet Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal is soaked with joy, the sweet scent of his pleasure and satisfaction warms Will from the inside, chases the smoke in his head and leaves him pliant and sweet in his mate's arms. He kisses Hannibal, soft yet wanting, just to hear Hannibal moan against his mouth.

He pulls back again, needing the air. Outside, the storm breaks, and the rain provides a gentle backdrop of white noise to their heaving breathes and hammering hearts.

Hannibal unfastens the belt from around Will's waist, lets it drop, and gathers Will in his arms. He lifts him, grunting with effort, and turns so that they can settle in one of the chairs, Will sprawled heavily on Hannibal's lap as they wait out his knot.

Will tucks his nose to Hannibal's neck, sighing. "Thank you," he whispers.

"What for, darling?"

Will huffs, shrugging. "I don't know."

Hannibal laughs, pressing a kiss to Will's forehead. He sighs, petting through Will's sweaty hair, carding it to one side so he can scratch his nails pleasantly across Will's nape. "I did not make you this way," he says. "I only called you mine. That means every part of you."

Will shivers, pressing his lips together. "You broke me," he says. "Like a wild horse. Can you really say you had nothing to do with fostering my desires?"

"Only if you, in turn, admit responsibility to my own," Hannibal replies mildly. Will lifts his head, smiling. "I find the thought of leaving you unsatisfied to be the greatest offense."

Will hums, leaning in and taking Hannibal's mouth in a kiss. Hannibal purrs in answer. "You satisfy me," he confesses, whisper-quiet and delighted at the flash of pleasure in Hannibal's heavy-lidded eyes. "Every part of me, as it turns out."

"Good," Hannibal replies. He pulls Will in by the neck, kisses his flushed cheek, his sweaty forehead. Will smiles, settling his hands on Hannibal's shoulders. "And you delight every part of me. I consider it a great failure on my part that it took such lengths to bring us here."

"Twenty-seven years is a long time," Will says. "But I understand."

It wouldn't have been right, if Shadow Man had come to him any sooner than this. Maybe it wasn't always Will – Hannibal admitted in his own letters that he was preparing a place – but it's true that they weren't ready, neither of them, until Will moved back to this house. Will is sure they could have been happy, if they'd been together sooner, but there would have been differences, subtle but there, and his pride bristles at the idea of accepting anything less than this.

Hannibal smiles, his scent and his eyes burning with joy. "I love you, my daydreamer."

Will smiles back, closes his eyes, and touches his forehead to his mate's. "And I love you, Shadow Man."

End Notes

Omg @ myself I'm so rude not to leave an ending thank you note. Thank you to everyone who encouraged and reviewed this fic, you guys keeps writers like me alive :D I hope y'all liked the ride half as much as I liked writing it!

Tell your friends! Yell at me on tumblr! Wish for my sleep schedule to return. I love y'all! <3

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!